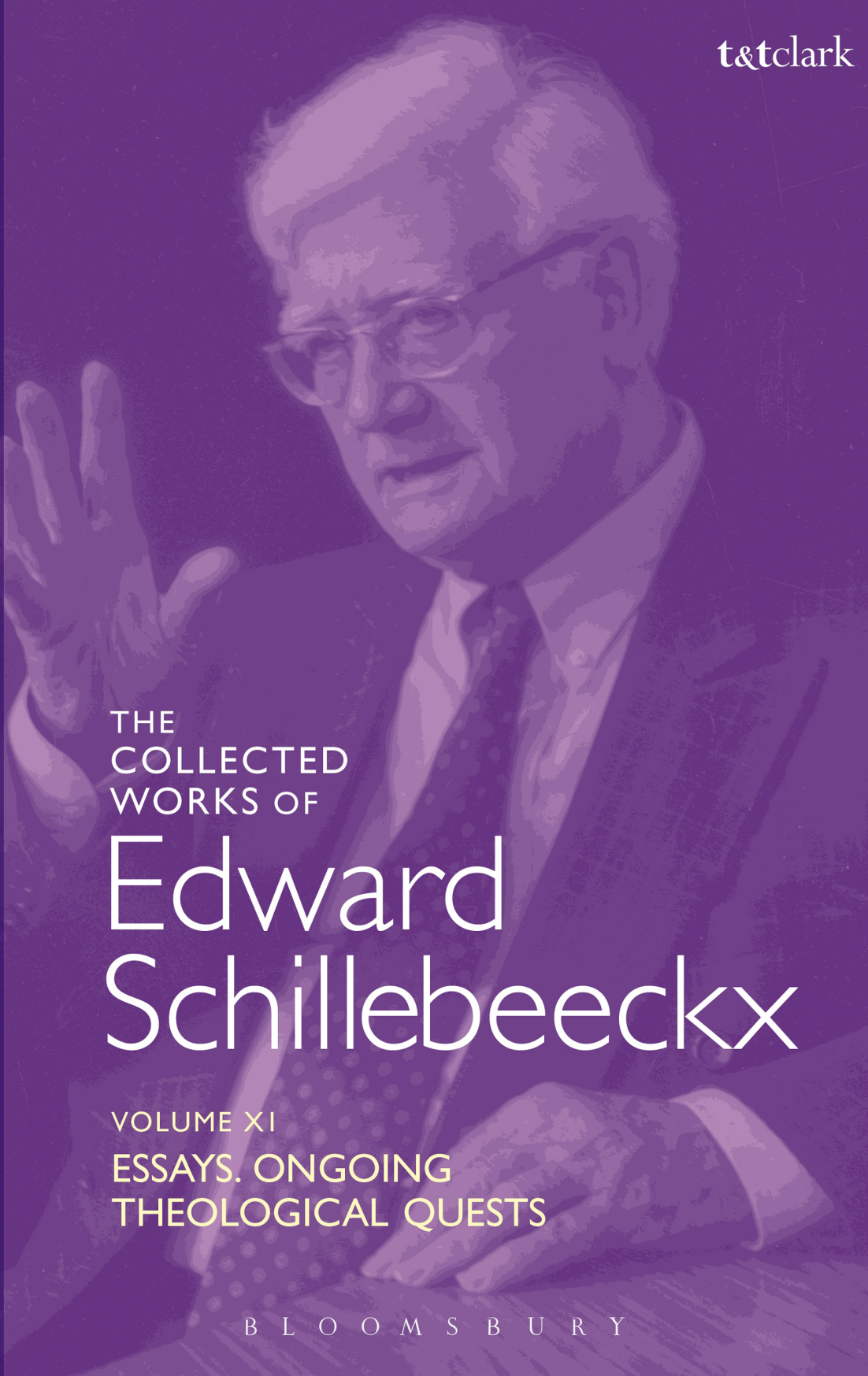

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THE COLLECTED WORKS OF

Edward Schillebeeckx

VOLUME XI

ESSAYS. ONGOING THEOLOGICAL QUESTS

BLOOMSBURY

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX

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Introduction to

COLLECTED WORKS OF EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX

Without a doubt Prof. Mag. Dr Edward Schillebeeckx O.P. (1914-2009) is one of the most creative and influential theologians of the 20th and 21st century. His work has been much discussed and is still widely popular in academic and pastoral circles. Schillebeeckx played a major role in theological and ecclesiastic renewal. His academic studies and scholarly pastoral books, sermons and lectures continue to inspire a wide reading public. His considerable authority as a scholar is based on extensive knowledge of the Christian tradition coupled with compassionate involvement with people and movements in church and society, especially those who are exposed to injustice and suffering.

A theologian of such exceptional stature in the Dutch language area certainly deserves enduring public attention. In 2004, therefore, on the occasion of Schillebeeckx's 90th birthday, the Edward Schillebeeckx Foundation made the first moves for the publication of his collected works. Extensive discussion followed on just what kind of publication we envisaged: a complete and comprehensive overview of his work, a critical edition of his monographs, an annotated reissue of his most innovative works and/or a selective republication of articles, including reflection on their reception. The preparatory committee − consisting of Dick Boer, Erik Borgman, Mijke Jetten, Kristanto Budiprabowo, Frans Maas, Robert Schreiter, Ted Mark Schoof O.P., Nico Schreurs and Carl Sterkens – was soon confronted with a major problem: the sheer volume of Schillebeeckx's work. He was a very prolific writer indeed. This is borne out by the updated version of Schillebeeckx's bibliography, compiled and published by Ted Schoof and Jan van de Westelaken, which can be found on the foundation's website: www.schillebeeckx.nl. A publication of his complete works, therefore, seemed virtually impossible. Some of them had been published in one language only (mostly Dutch, but also German and French), while translations, though usually meticulously checked by or on behalf of the author, at times differed somewhat from the original. Because of

practical concerns like financial constraints and the limited availability of translations we confined ourselves to a re-publication of Schillebeeckx's major works – still a daunting endeavour.

For similar reasons we decided not to republish the original Dutch texts but only translations, although we realize that not even the best translation can adequately convey the often subtle nuances and delicate shades of meaning of the original. Various misunderstandings at Schillebeeckx's much publicized 'conversation' with Vatican authorities on Christology in 1980 illustrate this risk. It seemed logical to choose translations which would be accessible to the extensive Anglophone world. Fortunately quite a number of good translations of Schillebeeckx's publications were available. Nonetheless a great deal of the *Collected Works* were revised once more, both linguistically and substantively. The translations of volumes 1 to 5 did not require checking: that had already been done at the time of the publication of the English versions (between 1963 and 1974) by Schillebeeckx's fellow brother and assistant at the time, Ted Mark Schoof, who, before concluding his theological education with Edward Schillebeeckx in Nijmegen, had followed the regular theology course of four years at Blackfriars, Oxford. Of the volumes 6, 7 and 11 the as yet untranslated parts were either translated or edited by Marcelle Manley. This applies particularly to volume 11, most of which now appears in English for the first time, but also to a new section in volume 7 (*Christ. The Christian experience in the modern world*). As for volume 6 (*Jesus: An experiment in Christology*), the (somewhat laboured) original translation by Hubert Hoskins was edited by Sr Joanna Dunham, and subsequently thoroughly revised and re-edited by Marcelle Manley, in such depth that she should be mentioned as co-translator. The substantive accuracy of John Bowden's original translations of volumes 7 to 10 (and of volumes 6 and 11 as well) was checked by Ted Schoof. Hence they are now published as 'authorized' versions. Volume 9 (*The church with a human face*) required such extensive terminological corrections that the earlier translation can no longer be considered reliable. In each volume the section 'How to use this book' synoptically outlines a format for references to the text.

Although many linguistic and substantive changes were introduced, we did not opt for gender-inclusive language. Present-day translations would undoubtedly have used this style, but for the sake of maximum fidelity to the original text, and for the practical reason that the English versions of volumes 1 to 5 did not require checking, we decided not to do so.

These *Collected Works* include Schillebeeckx's unquestionably major theological works. We chose them for their historical significance, theological relevance and impact on developments in theology and church communities. It was no coincidence that these works were mostly out of print. In the *Collected*

Works each volume will have a short introduction providing a brief sketch of its background, context and relevance.

The Edward Schillebeeckx Foundation is proud to present Schillebeeckx's most influential works in one readily available series. We thank the Flemish and Dutch provinces of the Dominican Order, and the Faculty of Theology at Radboud University, for making this publication possible. We hope its readers' enjoyment of these works will be as great as our appreciation of the support we received.

Prof. Dr Nico Schreurs
Chairman, Edward Schillebeeckx Foundation

Introduction to

ESSAYS
ONGOING THEOLOGICAL QUESTS

A Flemish former student wrote a commemorative article for Edward Schillebeeckx's 60th birthday, prefacing it with the comment that 'the master' would most likely spend his birthday writing: "the man does hardly anything else."[1] This tireless writing resulted in the first ten volumes of these *Collected Works* and a number of other monographs, as well as some 400 articles (between 1936 and 2005) and nearly fifty more or less lengthy contributions to the Dutch *Theologisch woordenboek* (Theological dictionary) (1952-1958). Many of the articles may be found in volumes 2 to 5 of the *Collected Works*. The contents of others unobtrusively found their way into volumes 8 and 9 of the same series. Schillebeeckx's principal contributions to the journal *Concilium* were published separately.[2] This eleventh volume of the *Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx* comprises eight noteworthy articles written from 1980 onwards, most of which have not been available in English previously.

Edward Schillebeeckx and his colleagues' (especially Karl Rahner) prolific article writing is typical of the turbulent post-1960 era. Catholic theologians in particular were responding to rapid changes in Christian faith and conduct and to developments in the church. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) triggered public debates as never before on the role of the Christian faith in personal and societal life, and exciting books like John A.T. Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963) stimulated theologians to interpret and adapt ever more radical changes. In this regard Schillebeeckx refers tellingly to an "almost feverish sense of urgency" to join in the debate.[3]

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[1] A.R. Van der Walle, 'Theologie over de werkelijkheid: een betekenis van het werk van Edward Schillebeeckx', in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 14 (1974), 463.

[2] E. Schillebeeckx, *The language of faith. Essays on Jesus, theology, and the church,* London and New York, 1995.

[3] E. Schillebeeckx, *God the future of man* (Collected Works Vol. 3), London, 1968, [169]. Cf. T. Schoof, 'E. Schillebeeckx: 25 years in Nijmegen', in: *Theology Digest* 37, 4 (Winter 1990), 313-332; and 38, 1 (Spring 1991), 31-44.

Schillebeeckx's concern to keep abreast of new developments stayed with him to the end of his life. It resulted in new studies of themes he had often dealt with before: faith and experience, liberation theology, religious violence, the continuance of the Christian tradition. In these articles he often looked back on the theological road he had already travelled, and looked ahead at theological developments that he felt sure would or should follow. We thought it fitting to append a selection of these articles to the *Collected Works* as a separate volume. Six of the eight articles have never been published in English before. The other two (chapters 2 and 8) certainly seem worth presenting to a broader public yet again. All the articles were translated by Marcelle Manley, except for *The search for the living God* (chapter 2), which was translated much earlier by Edward Fitzgerald and Peter Tomlinson. Because of the diversity of themes we arranged the studies chronologically. An exception is Schillebeeckx's inaugural lecture of 1958, which is mentioned below. We inserted it immediately before his academic farewell lecture of 1983 to facilitate comparison of his stance at the start and the formal end of his professorship at Nijmegen University.

The article 'Experience and faith' from 1980 is a translation of a text from Edward Schillebeeckx's personal archive. He wrote it as a contribution to the massive German encyclopaedia *Christlicher Glaube in moderner Geselschaft* (37 volumes). This envisaged destination probably made him write more concisely than was his wont. Maybe because, despite this, his reflections exceeded the agreed limit some perfectly relevant elements of Schillebeeckx's text were omitted from the German version, especially from the concluding reflections and perspectives (section VI, 3 and VII), where he dwells in some detail on the role of religious praxis and the work of the Holy Spirit in human experience. For a proper grasp of Schillebeeckx's basic view this conclusion is particularly important, so we decided to include a translation of the full original Dutch text. This took some effort, for the text was preserved only in a rather faded carbon copy with handwritten emendations and notes by the author. It is worth noting that this study contains parallels with what Schillebeeckx had previously expounded in *Christ* (*Collected Works,* vol. 7) and to which he returned later in *Church* (*Collected Works,* vol. 10). But in the present study his perspective is broader, the structure is more systematic and the analysis more detailed. This makes the article highly relevant.

Along with manifest differences, the two academic lectures in this volume display some remarkable similarities, stylistic and linguistic as well as in their contents and approach. They are quite formal lectures that non-academics may find hard to follow. In the inaugural lecture of 1958, 'The search for the living God', the tone is still pre-conciliar. Nevertheless the lectures he had already given showed that Schillebeeckx would be mapping new terrain by dwelling in

detail on the prior history of traditional theological themes, by which the dominant neo-Thomist theology, for instance, was pinpointed and put in perspective. At the same time he sought to deepen traditional theology, drawing on contemporary – including secular – philosophy and various human and social sciences. He referred to atheistic humanism, emphasising how hard – albeit still possible – it was for human experience to reach out to God, and insisted on the importance of salvation history for our awareness of revelation. Theology should be a 'wisdom of life', but it is also a serious academic business and not a "dilettantish flitting from flower to flower" as he added in the original Dutch lecture, addressing his Dutch audience directly.

Twenty-five years later his farewell lecture, 'Theological interpretation of faith in 1983', shows how these turbulent years had taught Schillebeeckx how to keep the changing interpretation of the faith true to biblical and traditional tenets yet still digestible to a modern audience. Soon after Vatican II he started expanding his knowledge and understanding of hermeneutics in various directions: the profound German analysis of *verstehen*, more recent French semiotic and structural analysis, and especially English linguistic philosophy, which was becoming widely influential. In these fields he also found material and stimuli for the ideologically critical approach that was to become a key instrument in his topically oriented way of doing theology. In his two lengthy 'Jesus books' – *Jesus* (1979, Dutch original 1974) and *Christ* (1980, Dutch original 1977) – he had by now been able to refine these different elements. In his farewell lecture he looks back on this learning process. He reflects on (religious) tradition and the (current) situation as two poles in hermeneutics, on the role of the theologian whose own background colours his theological practice, and on the interaction between theory and praxis – all this in the perspective of the ideology critique he had by now recognised to be indispensable. With hindsight one could say that this approach was an elaboration of basic themes he had already announced in 1958. In his third and final 'Jesus book' – *Church. The human story of God* (1989) – he was to return to them yet again.

'Liberating theology' is dedicated to his close colleague J.B. Metz on the occasion of the latter's festschrift for his 60th birthday in 1988. This paper was expanded and edited for the Dutch edition of the festschrift that was published two years later; here we reproduce an English version of that text. Judging by the subtitle of the reflection on Metz's political theology it is also a mild criticism of his colleague's purport, more especially the somewhat confusing term 'politics' used by Metz. Particularly after acting as Gustavo Gutièrrez's honorary promoter in Nijmegen in 1978, Schillebeeckx wrote regularly on liberation theology, including articles defending it against attacks from the Vatican. The word 'liberation' in the original Dutch title of the second book of

his Jesus trilogy is no coincidence. In this extensive study of liberation theology Schillebeeckx explains why he opts for it and presents a far more radical elaboration of his concept of negative contrast experience. At much the same time he wrote an 'honorary article' for Gustavo Gutiérrez, in which he stresses the 'universal rights of the poor', especially of the sufferers among them – in which he concurs with Metz.[4]

Even during his early years in Louvain 'Discontinuities in Christian dogmas' preoccupied Schillebeeckx. It suffices to refer to an article dating back to 1952 on what he chose at that time to call 'development of tradition'.[5] But the article in this volume is far more recent. The text derives from a Dutch festschrift on the occasion of the retirement of his former assistant Ted Schoof from Nijmegen University in 1994. In Catholic theology the theme of the development of religious tradition has always related closely to the hermeneutics that Schillebeeckx used in his innovative theology after Vatican II. In his 'Jesus books' he had again been confronted with the problem. In Schillebeeckx's last extensive article on this theme he opens up new perspectives on the age-old question of how dogmatic definitions can remain true (only) by virtue of historical changes and discontinuities.

In his 'Theologisch testament' (Theological testament) that Schillebeeckx published in book form shortly before his 80th birthday in 1994 the second part – 'Theological quests' – is the most intriguing. It condenses his basic ideas in a personal revision of a text published the previous year following a lengthy interview with the Italian Francesco Strazzari.[6] The thoroughness of the revision is evidenced by the fact that the length of the text had more than doubled and, especially, was more accurately formulated. That makes it a fascinating intellectual autobiography. In a readily comprehensible style Schillebeeckx describes the development, adaptation and deepening of his key ideas over the years. He acknowledges that his theological thinking "clearly displays not just smooth continuity but also fluctuating ups and downs, as well as forms of continuity that could only be achieved by way of discontinuities" (p. 120 in this volume). He demonstrates this with reference to such cardinal theological themes as creation and grace, the mystery of God (God's absolute freedom and the Trinity as "diffident confession", which also includes Jesus), life beyond death, and ethics and religion, as well as some contemporary problems in the church (office, celibacy and ordination of women). As a tailpiece he presents a 'review' of the underlying structure of his thinking (including the role of the present-day context and of contrast experiences) and

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[4] E. Schillebeeckx, 'The religious and the human ecumene', in: M.H. Ellis and O. Maduro (eds), *The future of liberation theology. Essays in honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, New York, 1989, 177-188.
[5] E. Schillebeeckx, *Revelation and theology,* (Collected Works vol. 2), London, 1995, [073].
[6] E. Schillebeeckx, *Sono un Teologo Felice. Colloqui con Francesco Strazzari,* Bologna, 1993. English translation by John Bowden: *I am a happy theologian*, London, 1994.

of the religions (including Jesus's own 'ministry of God'), the ultimate destiny of humankind and spirituality. In these themes one still hears echoes of the interviewer's questions, which this inspired revision far exceeds. For this reason we felt that the existing English version of the original interview no longer sufficed and we reproduce Schillebeeckx's revision in his own words in an English translation for the first time. Although this text sometimes overlaps work that he had published elsewhere – for instance, the verbatim overlap of the first part of these theological quests with the first pages of the preceding article, 'Discontinuities in Christian dogmas' written in the same year – it provides a good, accessible summary of certain crucial themes.

Two years later Schillebeeckx explicitly returned to a theme he had dealt with several times before, inter alia in his three 'Jesus books'. 'Culture, religion and violence: theology as a component of culture' is a reflection in which he also responds to questions about his 'cultural theology' raised by Erik Borgman.[7] Once again Schillebeeckx deals with the meaning of culture, and especially the structural relation between culture, art and language as forms of human cultural activity. Among present-day 'cultural problems' he cites the disappearance of points of reference; the relation of culture to the Transcendent; and violence, a counter element of 'culture', that has frequently foisted itself on religion, including historical Christianity.

The final article in this volume, 'Towards a rediscovery of the Christian sacraments', is pertinent especially because it outlines a perspective for an envisaged, thorough revision of his first book in these *Collected Works: Christ the sacrament of the encounter with God.* In it he explores the radical developments since the appearance of that early bestseller, not only in the church and theology, but more recently also in studies of rites and symbols in what is known as Ritual Studies. In light of these developments, and following his on-going studies of Jesus and his view of God's kingdom, he looks for a new synthesis. To this end he outlines the dead ends in which current theology of the sacraments has ended up and opens up new perspectives, drawing on Ritual Studies. He bases his interpretation on (the symbols of) 'everyday life' and the sacramental 'celebration' of religious key moments in our lives. Seen thus, sacraments are ritually stylised symbols of religious moments directed to God's future. The striking subtitle of his preview, 'Experiences of meaning and contrast refined into ritual', refers to themes that occupied him in recent years and also proposes solutions to theoretical and practical problems, both past and present. A few years later, to Schillebeeckx's gratification, a (French)

[7] In an article in the special issue of *Tijdschrift voor Theologie*, 1994 no. 4. Cf. also E. Borgman, *Edward Schillebeeckx: a theologian in his history*, Vol. I, *A Catholic theology of culture (1914-1965)*, London and New York, 2003.

translation of his great first work of 1952, *De sacramentele heilseconomie,* finally appeared, with the recent article as an addendum.

Some time after writing this article Schillebeeckx must have realised that elaborating this theme into a full length book was no longer feasible. Although he made copious personal notes while studying the literature, there are no systematically worked out texts after that date. He no longer had the energy to elaborate his first acquaintance with Ritual Studies into a thoroughgoing reorientation of his earlier thinking. Still, he did continue working on a third volume of sermons, which, according to the publisher, included a too lengthy introduction. But Schillebeeckx never really could abridge texts. His head always had been and still was too crammed with ideas. So, uncompleted, he left this last work to the care of a collaborator.

Ted Mark Schoof & Carl Sterkens

Chapter 1

EXPERIENCE AND FAITH

Revelation, faith and experience

Many Christians still perceive an insurmountable opposition between faith as submission to divine revelation and human experience.[1] They believe that religious conformity includes independence from human experience. They maintain that faith, in the sense of sharing in the absolute divine Mystery, can never come via human experience. This raises an obvious question: how do we perceive revelation without human experience? Besides, what do the age-old Christian references to religious experiences mean?

I. EXPERIENCES OF REVELATION IN EVERYDAY HUMAN LIFE

1. 'It was a revelation to me'

In ordinary conversation we sometimes hear people say, 'that was a revelation to me'. Not all experiences appear to be of a kind that evokes a surprised exclamation, 'a real revelation!'. After all, the so-called ordinary course of events includes many everyday experiences. But against and within the background of the whole range of anonymous and somewhat more explicit run of the mill experiences some events hit us in the eye and make us say: that was a revelation to me. By that we mean that something startling has occurred, something that interrupts everyday humdrum experience and, on closer scrutiny (for experience, too, is an interpretation) turns out to be 'news' – but news in which we nonetheless discern and recognise our innermost selves. The new experience turns out to refer to the old, always unspoken 'familiar' reality. Otherwise we would not be able to find ourselves in such experiences of revelation. It is as if the experience gives us the proper word that we have so far been unable to find: a word that reveals reality to us. As if by grace that which we have never conceived of and never produced ourselves dawns on us

[1] This article does not deal directly with *theologia naturalis* but with the fact that we only become conscious of revelation through experience. Hence it is rather a matter of the structure of revelation than of testing such experiences (however important that may be); that we leave out of consideration. The crux is: the dilemma of *fides ex auditu* or faith based on experience is a false dilemma.

in such experiences. All this implies that experiences of revelation, through the disintegration of the mundane, induces a blissful, salvific or healing reintegration. Hence one could say that every human experience of salvation gives us a glimpse of an astounding passage – a *pascha* – from initial everyday integration via disintegration to new, differently oriented reintegration. Revelation includes conversion.

In such revelatory events we discern two inseparable aspects. (a) The experience tells us something about the subjective form of the person's response to an event. In that sense revelations always happen in the present (experiences take place now): in the story of a bygone event or a series of facts people experience something that speaks to them in an intensely personal way and makes them discover their innermost selves, their very being-in-the-world, in a completely new way. Revelation is always an event in the present, the here and now; hence it happens *in* the personal response of a person who, for purely arbitrary, subjective reasons, experiences certain occurrences as revelation. (b) Yet revelation is not confined to the person who perceives an event as a revelation to himself. There are also experiences in which people discover underlying meaning for purely subjective, arbitrary reasons**.** An experience can only rightly be called a revelation if the experienced event – in nature, history, interpersonal dealings or 'the world' – discloses something that evokes this particular response and no other, but without displaying an ability to force the subject to make just this response and not another. After all, what is objectively reported in the experience appears in a veiled form that permits many different interpretations. Besides, it presents itself to human freedom in a way that permits us to affirm or refute it. Yet subjective affirmation implies submission of human freedom to the norm of what the experience – as it were from outside the person and her own thoughts – discloses to and in the depths of the person. What we did not conceive of or produce evokes such experiences in people who are prepared to listen trustingly and disinterestedly. This unthought of reality is freely affirmed, in direct succession as it were, as an intensely personal act of their innermost centre of action. It prompts thought and action. Thus human experience with its variegated spectrum of varying 'revelational density' **i**s the cardinal transmission process in humankind's unending quest for truth and goodness, justice and happiness.

2. Varying revelational density of human experience

Even in interpersonal dealings we notice that people do not express and reveal themselves fully in all their actions. Some people's day-to-day behaviour tells us little of what these actors really are and ultimately expect and want from life. Their innermost aspirations and inspirations are not transparent in such experiences. But in people's overall behaviour and life there are also special

acts that could be considered 'revelations' of their innermost self, and are experienced as such by others. Ordinary actions do not have the same 'revelatory' quality or have it only in conjunction with and in relation to such special acts, of which in the final analysis they are a part. In their distinctive and remarkable, their less pronounced and ultimately in their anonymous actions people's lives in their entirety are a revelation of what they really are – even though it needs caring openness and disinterested accommodation to see others' lives experientially and interpretively as they really are and not differently. From a revelational perspective we can thus speak of a hierarchy of experiences**.**

II. RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES OF REVELATION

1. Religious use of human experiential categories

Religious people − or theists − use human experiential categories as defined above readily, albeit with unassertive reticence, to verbalise experiences of what they call God's active involvement with humans and, according to Christian belief, in a special way in the life of Israel and decisively in the life of Jesus, experienced as the Christ.

In this respect the Christian revelation boils down to the following: on the basis of their experiences of Jesus, his followers maintain that in this man, in his living message, his praxis and death, in his entire person God's intentions for humankind – and thus God's true nature – is optimally revealed: Jesus is where God decisively *revealed himself as salvation of and for people.* Supreme revelational density in a whole history of experiences of revelation – that is how Christians experience Jesus. For this reason human experience has a distinctive, unique place in revelation history, even if in this case, as in all authentic experiences of revelation, the revelation is not the fruit of the experience but the other way round. Hence experiences of revelation tell us something about certain people's self-understanding, but their articulation of it is not meant simply to say something about themselves (i.e. their life-renewing experience and new self-understanding, namely how *they* see Jesus) but also about Jesus: that he is God's supreme self-expression and for that reason they experience salvation in him. So the actual intention or intrinsic orientation of a religious pronouncement in no way substantiates the revelation: the power of the revelation in fact underlies the religious response. However, we need to advance solid grounds to show to some extent that it is not human beings that make God speak, but that (and how) God makes himself known in and through human experience.

Faith does not exist purely in experiential mode. It never reaches consummation in exclusively experiential fullness, but includes verbalised reflection, conceptualisation and interpretation, which are only rudimentarily

present in the actual experience. Experience has to be digested rationally. Accordingly religious experiences eventually culminate in religious propositions, which to some extent structure an experiential tradition such as Christianity. Religious experiences are interpreted in religious language and propositions, and ultimately in systematic theological statements. The structure of such religious experiences of revelation will be clarified in the course of this chapter.

2. Revelation in religious experiences of revelation

Linguistically revelation can be understood at two levels. On the one hand it is essentially the pre-predicable unsayable, the ineffable which is the foundation of faith, religious praxis and religious thought. On the other hand the unsayable − insofar as it is captured in reflection − is also called revelation, that is the conceptually articulated, 'conceptualised' manifestation of the ground of faith that is not accessible to direct contemplation.[2] Revelation is a function of the unreflexive, pre-theoretical datum, the self-giving of that which has always underlain and still underlies the process of faith. At the reflexive level – 'revelation as a category' – we seek to discuss revelation (in the first, fundamental sense) as the foundation of faith, although this is never altogether feasible. The foundation of faith cannot be founded in something else, although it must be *named.* But such naming and reflection never fully 'conceptualise' or articulate the ineffable whence and whither of faith.[3] The fact that revelation is the foundation of religious experience means that faith does not owe either its existence or its distinctive contents to itself.

Revelation as a foundation is nonetheless historically *manifested* in humanly ascertainable events − for Christians in the life of Jesus. Thus revelation becomes a categorical expression of certain experiential areas, or at any rate of conceptually determinable aspects of those areas – areas that are open to discussion. Ultimately, then, it is *people* who speak about revelation, which has all sorts of implications (to be analysed mainly in sections III and IV).

III. RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE − 'FAITH THROUGH HEARING' OR 'FAITH THROUGH EXPERIENCE': A FALSE DILEMMA

1. General structure of experience

Like all human knowledge, religious experience has to be learnt. It does not come to us from nowhere but has a basis.

[2] P. Eicher calls the former 'revelation as chiffre' and the latter 'revelation as category': Eicher 1977, 22-27; also R.H. Hart 1968, 83-105. The somewhat differently oriented but similar distinction between 'transcendental' and 'categorical' revelation derives mainly from K. Rahner 1976, 157-167.
[3] See Eicher 1977, 25.

Experience presupposes, firstly, that something – an event in nature or history, a human encounter, et cetera – is there to be experienced. Secondly, the experience of such an event presupposes an interpretive framework, which co-determines what we experience. Experiential learning is a process of relating new real-life events to previously acquired knowledge and experience, triggering an interaction. The totality of previously acquired experience becomes a framework or experiential horizon, in which we interpret new experience; at the same time new, specific experience subjects the existing interpretive framework to criticism and corrects it, or puts it in a new context.[4] In other words, we always experience things in an existing interpretive framework, which in the final analysis is simply our cumulative (individual and collective) experience, our experiential tradition. The overall interpretive framework, into which a specific experience is incorporated, imparts meaning to a particular experience, making it *meaningful*. Here we must bear it in mind that the interpretive framework in its turn came about in the same way as our current experiences; earlier, even more limited cumulative experience served as an interpretive framework or experiential horizon, into which at that time still new experiences – to us already part of our interpretive framework – were incorporated. Hence the interpretive framework itself was constructed from facts and events that had befallen people previously.

On the one hand, then, we cannot simplistically regard experience and its interpretive framework (i.e. experience and *tradition*) as antithetical; but neither can we treat them as mutually affirmative. After all, things happen and new experiences occur that are difficult or impossible to accommodate in our cumulative experiential tradition. When such oppositions first arise we tend to adjust our interpretive framework. Only when all attempts at readjustment prove abortive are we faced with the question whether a revolution in the existing interpretive framework is called for, at any rate if we want to remain true to ourselves.[5] Hence particular experiences, or a particular series of events, influence the existing interpretive framework and may in some instances give rise to a fundamental crisis that requires radical reorientation.

On the one hand such interpretive guidance of all particular experiences from a given experiential tradition or horizon is positive, in that it enables us to understand those experiences; on the other hand it is negative, in that it limits understanding, is selective and directs new experience beforehand.[6]

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[4] Schillebeeckx 1977, 25-330; Kuitert 1977, 133-139; for the problem of radical changes in such interpretive frameworks, see Welte, Kuhn & Lash.

[5] In this regard some authors speak of epoch-making shifts, e.g. B. Welte et al., *Zur Frühgeschichte der Christologie* (Quaest. Disp., 51), Freiburg etc., 1970, 103-105. We find an analogous situation in the physical sciences: Th.S. Kuhn, *Die Struktur wissenschaftlicher Revolutionen*, Frankfurt, 1967; cf. N. Lash, *Change in focus: A study of doctrinal change and continuity*, London, 1973.

[6] P. Ricoeur, *Finitude et culpabilité*, 2 vols., Paris, 1960.

2. Structure of religious experiences

Religious experiences all have the same structure. They are particular human experiences of this-worldly happenings.[7] It is necessary, however, to analyse their structure more carefully. Religious experiences occur in and in association with everyday, specific human experience, but are illuminated by one's religious tradition that functions as an interpretive framework. Thus present-day Christians experience modern human experience as Christian on the basis of and in the Christian experiential tradition.[8] Religious experience, then, proceeds dialectically. On the one hand the core of faith, itself an expression of the collective experience of a particular group (in concrete terms, the Christian churches), determines the religious, authentically Christian contents of certain modern human experiences. On the other hand the actual contents − for instance, of proclamation – do not lead directly to Christian religious experience;[9] only when it has been clarified with guidance from Christian experiential history can present-day human experience become personal Christian experience, in which we experience divine salvation in Jesus.[10] While Christian experiential tradition is a condition for others to be able to experience the gospel, people only have personal Christian experiences in and through experience here and now.

Thus *Christian* experiences happen in and through human experience of people in this world and day-to-day experience with all its attendant problems, but *illuminated by* the religious contents of Christian experiential tradition. Faith comes 'through hearing' but is only realised in personal experience. Only when the living tale of a religious tradition is told and practically enacted in a community can modern people have Christian experiences in terms of, in and through their present-day human experiences, that is can they either identify with or dissociate themselves from that tale.[11] In the tale they can also discover themselves in their earthly human experience: Christian experiential tradition either fits their personal modern experience … or not!

Even though liturgical worship in churches is where we praise, give thanks for and celebrate God's salvation and where the story of the Christian tradition is told, we must not – especially not in a so-called secular world – limit situations that may trigger religious experience to proclamation of God's word and liturgical worship, itself an expression of this-worldly religious

[7] E. Jüngel, *Unterwegs zur Sache*, München, 1972; cf. G. Ebeling, *Wort und Glaube*, III, Tübingen, 1975, 22.
[8] Cf. Schillebeeckx 1978, 13-17; Kuitert 1977, 140-159.
[9] Kuitert 1977, 149-153.
[10] Schillebeeckx 1978, 16-17.
[11] J. Treck 1976; F. Mildenberger, *Theologie für die Zeit*, Stuttgart, 1969, 157ff.; H. Zahrnt, 'Religiöse Aspekten gegenwärtiger Welt und Lebenserfahrung', in *Zeitschrift f. Theol. u. Kirche* 17 (1974), 94-122; Schillebeeckx 1978, 14-17.

experience.[12] The church's liturgy and proclamation of the word presuppose the existence of religious experience of and in human experiences (e.g. the real-life fellowship of a group of people with the man Jesus in Palestine), which in its turn presupposes a fundamental symbolic experience in and of our profane creaturely world. Without fundamental creaturely experience no innovation or adaptation of the liturgy or unexplicated proclamation of the Christian gospel can give us a deepened Christian experience which involves God's presence rather than just a purely subjective response to the liturgy enacted in church. We cannot suddenly experience God in liturgy if we have not perceived him outside the church in everyday experience of people and the world (although one cannot rule out the possibility that some people come to have religious experiences in this-worldly events as a result of the church's liturgy and proclamation; implicit meaningful experiences, and questions arising from these, and interest in the church's liturgy have long influenced each other).

Because people usually come to believe through experience of others and the world, such this-worldly transmission also explains the differences between religions. The origin of the many religions can be traced to the same source, namely the multiplicity of human experiences of others and the world in a personal, specifically located history.[13] Speaking about God in terms of human experience, then, is essentially part of making worldly experience susceptible to religious discussion,[14] albeit always illuminated by a particular (e.g. Christian) experiential tradition.

It follows that the scene in which Christian faith flourishes and is transmitted is not just a religious community or a church, but also everyday human experience in the real world and history in which people live. Regarding the church as the only proper setting for religious experience will in the long run not only impoverish Christians' experience of their faith, but will turn the church into an other-worldly ghetto. The fact that the Christian church is an *institution* does not alter the fundamental structure of experience, since institutionalisation cannot and may not mean that it ceases to be a living church in our ongoing history and replicates the original institution only in a material sense!

3. Apostolic and present-day religious experience

From the foregoing it should be evident that a Christian response to who Jesus is, and what kind of divine salvation we can experience in him in our time, cannot be made from a one-sided position, that is exclusively on the basis or through analysis of biblical texts and ecclesiastic documents, or exclusively on

[12] Schillebeeckx 1977, 793-797.
[13] H. Kuitert 1977, 130-133.
[14] R. Schaeffler 1973, 207-210.

the basis and through analysis of current experience in society. Hence our provisional conclusion is that such a response (in practical identification with or discipleship of Jesus) is only feasible in terms of a *correlation* between the two poles; we then show that this correlation must be *mutually critical*.

We cannot learn who Jesus is from contemporary experience alone, but also not from Scripture and tradition alone. For, to begin with, we are dependent on experiences of believers who, as Peter puts it in Acts, "have accompanied us during all the time that Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken from us – one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection" (Acts 1:21-22). Thus we are reliant on what are known as apostolic experiences of Jesus reported in New Testament testimonies. These New Testament Christians speak to us from their experience: "[that] which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands" is what they testify to; "that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you" (1 John 1:1-3). Hence our Christian faith does not go back to so-called 'heavenly voices' but to a perfectly real earthly event in our history: the life of Jesus of Nazareth, which in a special way was experienced as salvation by those who followed him. They experienced God's salvation in this Jesus and testify to us about their experiences with him. Their accounts of these testimonies become a message to others: an offer of a new life that can be experienced by everybody. Hence the start of Christian tradition can be traced to what may be called the testimony of *apostolic religious experience.*

Experience, also in the case of Jesus' first and New Testament disciples, remains *interpretive perception.* Jesus' adversaries, too, experienced and interpreted him, in the sense that they also formed a picture of him – one that drove them to execute him. Thus they experienced him as a threat, whereas his disciples experienced him as salvific and compassionate. It is not only the interpretations of proponents and adversaries that diverge on this point; their actual experience of Jesus differed qualitatively: on the one hand an experience of mortal threat, on the other a liberating experience.

Christian faith, then, relies in the first place on the religious experience of those who followed Jesus. Their religious praxis, itself the fruit of their practical identification with his words and deeds, and their testimonies to these, historically transmit one and the same religious experience. But that transmission can only be considered successful – that is, appropriation of those bygone experiences is only possible – if they are appropriated here and now in ever new Christian experiences of liberation. That also triggers living experience, which becomes a living message to yet others in new testimonies, in the sense of a living offer of a new experiential possibility.

Hence the dilemma of 'faith through experience' and 'faith through hearing' is false. Others' experience can never be communicated directly, just as we cannot replicate the still romantic attempts by Schleiermacher and Dilthey, as if we can crawl into someone else's skin and share his experience. To appropriate others' experience requires objective transmission, more especially that of *sequela Christi*: a constantly renewed discipleship, hence transmission through practical identification with Jesus' life that proclaims God's kingdom as the future of humankind, in such a way that via his words and deeds it is already present to those who believe in him.

Testimonies to salvific experiences of Jesus (including proclamation and catechesis) are never confined to present-day human grassroots experience; they also have to substantiate and disclose as evocatively as possible what Christian faith can mean to people in our time and society. People must know what 'search strategy'[15] or interpretive framework they want to use and let themselves in for. But if the churches' proclamation communicates or 'transmits' their long experiential history in terms of a conceptual system and worldview that are foreign to modern people, most people will immediately lose any desire to seize on *this* Christian search strategy as a possible interpretation of human experience. Experiential catechesis unaccompanied by the story of Jesus, on the other hand, does not function as Christian teaching. Who God is, and how he wants to be experienced, according to Christian tradition, was shown by God himself in a specific history, an event grounded in Jesus in the overall history of humankind. That history will have to be recounted as truthfully as possible if humans are to have a Christian experience in terms of their ordinary human experience. Thus experiences of God are transmitted through histories and stories in which they become so involved that in and through these *human* experiences they come to have specifically *Christian* experiences. Christian religious experience is gained only in human experience as a kind of 'alternative experience' illuminated by the living memory of the story of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.[16]

IV. AUTHORITY OF EXPERIENCES

1. General conditions for the authority of experiences

Meaningful experiences are authoritative because they reveal meaning. But here we have to introduce all kinds of qualifications that clarify whether that meaning is our fantasy or whether it reveals itself to us.

The human experiencing mind, also inasmuch as it is the subject of God's revelational appeal, is not a tabula rasa. Revelation is not received in a mental

[15] For this term, 'zoekontwerp', see Kuitert 1977, 115ff.
[16] See Schillebeeckx 1978, 16-17.

and societal vacuum. Let me briefly develop some aspects of the complex structure of human in this connection.

– a) Human consciousness has an ability to raise something that one has experienced for discussion. That discussion is couched in language, which includes images and concepts, connotations and emotions that have a long history, are pre-existent in one's cultural group, and have socio-economic implications. Language itself contains certain views of the world and humankind. It is perhaps the very first conception of the world in which a person is raised and lives. The idioms and forms in which (religious) experiences are articulated derive from the human imaginative repertoire, in its turn dependent on historical experiences, in their turn tied up with the individual's situation and with collective, socio-cultural and socio-emotive existential contexts. Without such active articulation there is no validity and truth, hence no experience of revelation. (Religious) experience cannot ignore human cognitive activity that is articulated in language. Elements of experiences under discussion that are articulated in non-secular terms need to be critically analysed if the experience, communicated in existing language, is to manifest its authority.

- b) Human experiencing consciousness (as we are told by 'masters of suspicion' such as Marx, Feuerbach, Nietzsche and Freud) is also a capacity to speak in terms of unconscious wishes that, once articulated, in fact obscure what really ought to have been said; psychologically or socially what ought to have been said is 'repressed'. If experience is to be authoritative, possible repression needs to be examined critically and rationally.

- c) Claims to so-called 'direct' experience likewise require critical scrutiny. After all, experience is communicated socio-economically as well. The objective form of society, such as the Western one, not merely exists outside us but has repercussions for our inner selves, where it becomes a form of consciousness in its own right.[17] Because experience is transmitted socio-economically, it only becomes competent, authoritative and orientational when we critically consider the conditions that gave rise to it.[18] Otherwise we have no grounds to say that analysis of the history of origin of experiences in itself includes criticism or refutation of their validity and truthfulness. Methodologically knowledge of a historical evolution process and criticism of logical coherence, validity and truth are two totally distinct problems, although knowledge of the evolution of experience and semantic patterns can help to eliminate elements that exempt it from criticism.[19]

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[17] P. Berger & Th. Luckmann, *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit*, Frankfurt, 1966; P. Berger, B. Berger & Th. Luckmann, *The homeless mind*, New York, 1974; A.C. Zijderveld, *Die abstrakte Gesellschaft*, Stuttgart, 1972.

[18] W. Korff, *Norm und Sittlichkeit*, Mainz, 1973, 131-142.

[19] A. Paus, 'Zum Verhältnis von Religion und Methode', in: Th. Michels (Hg.) *Heuresis (Festschrift*

– d) Experience is also said to be communicated socio-politically. But this general statement is not sufficient. Careful analysis of the situation peculiar to our era is essential for basic experiences to manifest their original authority. Such analyses have shown that our socio-economic culture is inwardly determined by bourgeois ideology that, via the Enlightenment, has given us a society of utilitarian individualism,[20] whereas in the east (of Europe) society is characterised by a counter history of historical dialectic materialism that colours the experience of its members. A striking feature of our society is that we glibly refer to human beings, humankind and universality, whereas on closer analysis it appears that what is meant is either the socio-economically emancipated bourgeois subject or the communistic comrade ('what is communist is human, what is human is communist'). If one analyses basic human experiences without regard to such ideological implications (as often happens in so-called humanistic psychology),[21] one discovers a hierarchy of values in these experiences that are said to be universally human, whereas in fact they largely reflect the values of bourgeois, economically emancipated society in which the socio-economically oppressed fail to recognise themselves. Besides, we must consider that dialectics has been assimilated into history. At present technological rationality is increasingly identified with the powers that hold sway in the East and the West, with the result that the major disparities in the world have shifted to a contrast between North (rich countries) and South (poor countries). All this has fundamental significance for religious praxis in the framework of global experience.

– e) Experience is not purely interpretive and does not merely use existing images and concepts to articulate its perceptions; it also uses humanly contrived models and theories that seek to epitomise a maximum number of experiential phenomena as simply and lucidly as possible.[22] Consequently (experiential) propositions as expressions of (religious) experience are not merely articulations of certain 'direct experiences' but also of human theories or models. This precludes dogmatising either direct experience or models.

– f) Within human consciousness there is an active relation between the (individual and collective) unconscious and reflexive consciousness. That gives the perceiving human mind a projective structure. Symbolic activity, which is particularly pronounced in experiences of transcendence, occurs primarily at the transition from the unconscious to the conscious mind rather than at a conscious, reflexive level. Apart from their capacity to articulate reality, symbols also link the mind to the stream of the unconscious. Ever since the

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für A. Rohracker), Salzburg, 1969, 11-24.

[20] Schillebeeckx 1978, 65-66.

[21] E.g. A. Maslov, *Toward a psychology of being*, New York, 1968.

[22] Schillebeeckx 1978, 24-27.

work of C.G. Jung one can hardly deny the operation of unconscious forces in interpretive articulations of – especially religious – experience, but that does not mean that what is experienced as, for example, revelation is simply an unconscious activity of the human mind. The projective aspect of human experience can be evaluated positively. Here a distinction between archetypal and cultural symbols is warranted.[23]

Symbols – such as the kingdom of God, Black Power, *la grandeur française*, et cetera – are basic ideas that can also create the future. But in themselves archetypes and symbols are *religiously* neutral; they are indefinite without any orientation, hence can also convey experiences of revelation. The presence of unconscious influence per se is not evidence for or against authentic experience of revelation, which after all is not confined exclusively to the reflexive, conscious level. But neither can we treat religious experiences as altogether definite or expound their real meaning by simply analysing their psychological antecedents and implications.

– g) Finally, particular experiences are never isolated but are assimilated into the person's entire mental life. Viewed thus, all psychic experiences – including religious ones – emerge partly from an obscure, largely unconscious stratum. For this reason purely religious experiences (which are already experiences-of-experiences) are an abstraction. So not all religious experiential behaviour with an admixture of nonreligious elements is necessarily pseudo-experience or pseudo-religious.

This thumbnail sketch of the complex structure of human experience suffices to show that it is not a one-dimensional phenomenon. More than that, current burgeoning insight into that structure coupled with growing awareness of the changeability and actual changes in our society gives rise to a new form of consciousness that has been called 'ongoing reflection'.[24] All traditions, once taken for granted, are critically questioned.

Thus experience occurs in a dialectic process, an interplay of perception (in a particular interpretive framework) and thought, and of thought and perception. Experience only has authority when it has been reflected on. Otherwise its irrational side will dominate: it *does* something to me, or it does not. Even though reason is not the starting point, authoritative experience implies reason, critical rationality.[25] Thought makes experience possible and experience makes renewed thinking essential. Our thinking remains vacuous if it does not continually fall back on experience, which in its turn remains irrational without reflexive reason. Ultimately experiential authority is a

[23] 'Historical master images', however much the two may overlap: R.L. Hart, *Unfinished man and the imagination,* New York, 1968, 300-305.
[24] 'Dauerreflexion'. H. Schelzky, *Auf der Suche nach Wirklichkeit*, Düsseldorf/Cologne, 1965, 250ff.
[25] Mieth 1977, 120-134; 1978, 39-53.

capacity derived *from* experience that paves the way *for new* experience.[26] Experience is authoritative once it has been digested, not purely in itself.

Provided it is critically pondered, human experience as a revelation of a reality not humanly conceived of or created actually becomes authoritative and valid; it possesses cognitive, critical and productive or liberating power in humankind's protracted search for truth and goodness, justice and happiness. To this end our experience has to be conditioned by freedom and be given institutional scope, for institutional violence, as well as a one-sided (e.g. exclusively techno-scientific) culture, which under social pressure comes to be rated as the dominant cultural value, can impoverish the experience of participants in that culture and manipulate all experience.

Naturally new experience is not authoritative solely by virtue of its novelty; nobody in his right mind would claim that. nothing in history guarantees that the course of human experience is exclusively progressive and cannot be regressive as well. Hence 'discerning the spirits', partly by remembering past experience, is part of the experiential competence and authority of experiences.

A person or group that has had an authoritative experience becomes a witness by virtue of that event: they recount what happened to them. If their accounts are reflective, they open up a legitimate new existential option for others; they set something in motion. Experiential authority becomes operative in accounts of lived experience and its life-renewing power. Experiential authority has a narrative structure.[27] Hence we rightly speak of Old and New Testament *stories* and of Jesus as the story of a living person.

2. *Authority of experiences of threatened humanity: contrast experience or the authority of suffering humans*

Even though human life is replete with meaningful experiences, experiences of folly, injustice and pain have special revelational significance and, therefore, authority. The fact is that both everyday and scientific, experimental experience owe a great deal to contrast experience: encounter with the resistance and recalcitrance of the world we live in.

People live by conjectures and hypotheses, projects and constructs, hence by trial and error; their projects may be constantly thwarted by resistance and recalcitrance in the real world, which does not always accord with rational human expectations. When reality resists human designs and thereby implicitly orients them, we are in living contact with an *independent* reality that we have not conceived of or created. Hence one could say that alienation and disintegration of our achievements and projects put us in touch with truth. The hermeneutic principle of truth disclosure in this case is not that which we take

[26] Gadamer ²1965, 329-344.
[27] Metz 1977, 63-64. 136-148; Mieth 1977, 60-72; Schillebeeckx 1977, 31.

for granted but the frustrations of an intractable reality.[28] This 'negativity', whose resistance makes us revise earlier insights, is productive; it has special, albeit dialectically negative and critical significance in revelational experience. After all, we are not granted absolute knowledge, but we refuse to escape into scepticism. We learn wisdom from the pain of failure, which reorients us. The knowledge of the hidden magnet of reality manifested in negative experience contains something extraordinarily positive, even though it is knowledge that can never be fully objectified or articulated. For that reason negative contrast experience can never be a goal in itself – that would render it unproductive. Hence the authority of experience *culminates* in stories of human suffering: the grief of failure, of pain, of evil and injustice, of love, guilt and mortality. These are great moments in the discovery of truth in and through *finite* human experience. For experience that acts *against* the experiencing subject, even against our entire environment and society, advances human progress. Thus the most profound, life-changing and life-sustaining experiences are ones of conversion, of crucifixion that prompt *metanoia*, change of meaning, behaviour and existence.[29] Such experiences break us down but lead to reintegration. To experience meaning is an integration, but often entails disintegration, suffering and recalcitrance.

Thus the history of human suffering in particular gradually reveals the concrete meaning of what the human condition entails. The actual meaning of humanity cannot be analysed without lapsing into disparate, fragmented, mutually contradictory themes. But the common denominator in all positive designs of human nature is resistance to that which threatens humanity. Thus histories of suffering indirectly, 'pathically' reveal the summons of and to humanity.[30]

3. The authority of Christian religious experiences

In view of the structure of Christian revelation that is articulated in and through religious experiences and ultimately, after reflexive pondering, is expressed in doctrine, we can see that the authority of Christian religious experiences is no less complex. That authority cannot lie exclusively in testimonies to apostolic religious experiences (Holy Scripture and the biblical experiential tradition of Christianity), nor exclusively in what is known as modern experience.

In certain forms of present-day catechesis and proclamation there is a trend that bases itself on foundational human experiences, which are then

[28] Kasper 1970, 235; Schillebeeckx 1977, 28.
[29] Mieth 1978, 159-167.
[30] Metz 1977, 38, 87-103 and 171-175; Schillebeeckx 1971, 96-101.

substantiated by 'stories', especially biblical ones and those of all great, mainly religious traditions.

The danger is that in many cases the stories become no more than ratifications: they serve to legitimatise the personal and collective biography. Without critical agency such a procedure – at any rate from a Christian viewpoint – may misfire. Although Christian religious experience is always a *contemporary* event, it nonetheless comprehends *tradition* and *promise*: it refers to past events in Jesus Christ and reaches forward to an eschatological future. In Christian terms the mere invocation of present-day human basic experiences without anamnesis or recollection and without prolepsis or eschatological anticipation is not feasible. After all, the concrete, living remembrance of the story of Jesus emanating from Scripture throughout the history of Christianity, despite all its ups and downs, is constitutive for a living Christianity in our day and age.

But from the foregoing it is clear that present-day people, like people through the ages, only have *Christian* experiences in and through human experience in and of this our human life world. Hence involvement in current human experiences in nature, history and with people in a perfectly concrete society co-determines the authority of 'Christian experiences'. From a Christian point of view experience only has authority in the living context of a reciprocal *critical theoretical* and *practical critical correlation* of apostolic religious experience then and our experience now, in which the intervening period plays a mediatory role. Considering the structure of our historical experience, then, a crude antithesis of the authority of traditional revelation and modern experience is naïve and pre-critical. The pertinent question is to what extent the historical identity of Christianity is either actualised or negated in new experiences and new praxis. Present-day experiences have hermeneutic, critical and productive potency for the experiential and epistemic contents of Christian tradition, but conversely Christian experience, if reflected upon, has its own original, critical and productive power to disclose the meaning of ordinary human experience in our world.

Still, the problem of the historical identity of Christianity, challenged as it is by new experience, cannot be resolved by purely theoretical hermeneutic means. That identity essentially requires *practical identification* in the sense of identification with Jesus' praxis, which was to proclaim the kingdom of God as a future for all people, in such a way that that future was already actualised in his ministry. On this assumption I seek to trace the reciprocal critical correlation between New Testament and past Christian experience and our new experience here and now.

4. Gospel based criticism of present-day experience

(a) Critical recollection of the past as criticism of the present

For various reasons every age has its sensitivities, but also its blind spots. Because human experience is historically, also geographically situated and hence must be evaluated contextually, and because past experience consciously or unconsciously affects present experience, critically considered recollection of that experience in new existential contexts can become cognitively, critically and productively operational in present-day experience.

In making critical recollection of the past operational 'anthropological constants' may be helpful.[31] What I call 'anthropological constants' are not so much products of philosophical reflection as 'dangerous recollections' (albeit articulated formally and philosophically) of wisdom and insight into the true human condition gained from bitter experience in and through mainly painful histories that turned out tragically. Thus in the course of our human history of sense and nonsense we have come to learn a great deal. I sum up:

– a) Firstly, true human freedom is not simply freedom to manipulate nature; the resistance of 'nature', our ecological life world, has taught us that it has its own autonomy that limits untrammelled human control. Hence it is essentially human freedom situated in and restricted by nature, and is certainly not arbitrary or absolute; that would make true humanity, and ultimately human survival as well, impossible by destroying the ecological principles of life. Here we have a 'revelation' of an anthropological constant in the history of bygone human suffering, which made us aware through bitter experience of the limits to existing raw materials, energy consumption and exploitation of nature and the natural confines of our Lebensraum. As a result we also discover the limits of economic expansion. Critical recollection of the past opens up a perspective on human relations to 'nature', relations that not only inhere in the admittedly authentically human value of technical mastery of nature, but also in the equally human value of non-technical, aesthetic, playful and pleasurable dealings with nature. The constraints nature imposes on its technical manipulability by humans for the sake of enhancing their human values also reveal a dimension of our humanity, namely that it *does not end with* purely technocratic mastery of nature. In the course of a protracted technocratic experiential process critical reflection has taught us that.

– b) The same long experience has taught us that personal human identity is only possible in genuine human fellowship. Being empowered by others and the community with a right to exist – knowing that I, too, have that right – with one's own name and identity as a personal, responsible individual, however

[31] Cf. Schillebeeekx 1977 (ET), 734-743.

disfigured and mutilated, contributes to authentic humanity. The history of human suffering reminds us of this as well.

– c) The dialectics between personal identity and social and institutional structures is also, as historical reflection teaches us, essential for humanity in a positive or negative sense, depending on the nature of the institutions. We have learnt that there is no enduring, worthy human existence without institutions that effectively guarantee human freedom, whereas certain structures that evolved in history can effectively preclude human freedom. That, too, humankind has had to learn from a long, painful history of sense and nonsense.

– d) Human history also teaches us (which is evident from the foregoing) that it is a critical and hermeneutic process of learning through trial and error, ultimately a matter of understanding our situation and exposing past follies perpetrated by human beings. Time and space inevitably play a role in such growing insight into what could be called true humanity.

– e) People are not animals who owe their survival to their instinctual nature and concomitant flexibility to adapt to altered or altering environments according to the evolutionary law of survival of the fittest in the struggle for life. Remembrance of past history teaches us that if human history is not to become a kind of 'spiritual Darwinism', an interplay of theory and praxis may be the sole assurance of an enduring, ever worthier culture − one which furthers human wholeness.

– f) Finally, critical recollection of human history teaches us that people and societies need holistic conceptions, a 'universe of meaning' or vision, an all-encompassing overall project in which they seek to locate all their particular experiences if they are not to succumb to nihilism; holistic visions, then, that teach us to experience human existence and coexistence, now or in future, as a totality that is wholesome and happy for everyone. Such holistic visions are both vision and praxis that seek to realise meaning and coherence in human life. They imply that critical recollection of the history of societies entails faith in and hope − whatever its concrete contents – of the integrity and quality, hence the wellbeing and wholeness of humankind and human society. Authentically human experience includes an element of hope and faith ('it is a revelation to me')!

These insights into 'anthropological constants' gained from the human past – hence in the final analysis always fragmentary – highlight certain spheres of value in human life that we cannot neglect without detriment to our humanity. As systematically articulated recollections they do not present us with explicit behavioural rules, since they don't tell us anything about the concrete state of, for instance, the existential and socio-economic dimensions of present-day society. As such they are hollow and formal. Nonetheless they are coded

signals from the painful history of humankind that warn us against the evils of certain one-sided human experiments that have proved fruitless and disastrous in the course of history. These 'constants' need to be given substance through painstaking analysis and interpretation of the actual situation of our society with all its existential and social dimensions. (Human protest against certain situations may be indicative of an implicit anthropology.) The same anthropological constants also alert us to the bias of analytical tools whose research design fail to take into account either socio-political life with its inner contradictions or human existence with all its requirements. As a result the analysis would be one-sided in the sense that it truncates the human condition.

(b) Critical recollection of Jesus' eschatological message and praxis

It is in the living story and consistent praxis rather than its formal articulation that the long history (of the faith and unfaithfulness) of a particular group of people – 'the Christian churches' – discloses a sharply focused recollection of a concrete history: that of Jesus of Nazareth, handed down as 'the Christ', bringer of divine salvation.

In the living tale from the New Testament onwards, illustrated by the ups and downs of what we rightly call the Judaeo-Christian experiential tradition, we discern a critical recollection that differs appreciably from recollections of, say, the liberation history triggered by the Enlightenment. The critical recollection of Christian liberation history is epitomised by two 'symbols' ('historical master images', see IV/1 above), that is New Testament basic ideas and key concepts that could be vitally important to people in their quest for the unknown essence of our humanity. These are, firstly, 'the kingdom of God and his righteousness'(Mt 6:33) or 'God's sovereignty', and secondly, 'resurrection of the body'.[32] The two concepts, or rather symbolic anticipations, express what perfect human wholeness, healing or salvation signifies according to Christian experiential tradition. The very words 'kingdom' or 'sovereignty' of God suggest a primarily political concept. This symbolic idea − Jesus' own message − implies that human wholeness is only possible if all human rule over fellow humans is replaced by the sovereignty of God, which brings peace and solidarity and seeks to put an end to master-servant relations, class struggles and distinctions between oppressor and oppressed; but without inner liberation of the sinful heart purely socio-economic liberation is usually no more than an inversion of power relations. From our side God's kingdom is indeed *sovereign*, that is recognised as originating in God; but as *God's* sovereignty it also implies human emancipation from both dehumanising socio-economic enslavement and self-imposed, enslaving commitments.

[32] See Pannenberg 1978, 104-117.

Resurrection of the body, being the supreme, definitive form of human personality, connotes individual, personal participation of all people in God's kingdom. After all, without resurrection people would remain deprived of any form of ultimate salvation, which would be reserved only for a remnant, a future generation – something that evoked critical questions even in the New Testament: 'will only those who are still alive at that time share in the kingdom?'

God's kingdom and the resurrection of the body fully and succinctly convey both the socially oriented and existential dimensions of human life. Thus *personal* resurrection is part of the evangelical message of the coming of God's *political* kingdom as well. The New Testament sees our individual and political destiny as an indissoluble whole; it exposes totalitarianism and exclusivism, both existential and political, as disastrous and ultimately humanly and socially degrading. The individual and socio-political realisation to which Jesus frees us in the Spirit is a new, solidary society to come, in which individuals are liberated not only from socio-economic oppression but also from arrogance, selfishness and bourgeois values, and are emancipated to liberating love. Although eschatological, this kingdom of peace, righteousness and love, this Christian freedom must already be enacted here and now in palpable, always recognisable forms in earthly history, which is never totally free from the dialectics of nature and history that includes suffering as well.

Through critical recollection of this Christian narrative humans continue to see the foundation and source of all true humanity in the living God, who wants salvation or wholeness for all people, hence *human* wholeness, in which ethical, religious communion with God is the innermost, all-encompassing dimension of human integrity. Liberation from sin through Christ extends to the entire human being, including her economic, social and political relations. It means that the transmission of the gospel relates to our time in two ways: it has a *mystical* and a *political* component, albeit not dualistically and discretely but in such a way that to Christians the political situation with its socio-economic contradictions, conflicts and suffering is the scene where the 'mysticism' of evangelical faith becomes concretely feasible.[33] Without this dual mystical and political structure the experiential tradition of the one Christian faith is reduced to either purely private religious spirituality or an exclusively socio-political enterprise, a mere replica of the political liberation models that are fashionable in the world. The question of the historical identity of the Christian experiential tradition does not consist in what Christians can add to what every right-thinking person is already saying and doing out of

[33] Metz 1978, 137-145; Schillebeeckx 1977, 820; see H.-A. Schlette, 'Christentum in der Welt von Morgen', in: *Orientierung* 42 (1976), 138-142; H. Schaeffer 1972, 226-242.

concern for an ever more beleaguered humankind, but in the total, unique critical and liberating action potential of Christian hope.

One can distance oneself from this Christian view of humans and their liberation, but without resorting to neo-dogmatic and pre-critical nonchalance no sincere seeker of true humanity can regard the Christian recollection of the desired future human being, already promised in Jesus, as an outdated vision from a pre-critical age. That would nip essential dialogue and critical solidarity between existing – Christian and non-Christian – liberation movements in the bud.

5. *Criticism based on present-day experience of apostolic and traditional religious experience*

Reciprocal critical correlation not only entails heeding evangelical criticism of present-day experience, but also, conversely, that criticism of 'the gospel' becomes meaningful in light of new experience. The latter may strike some people as blasphemy: how can one criticise God's word on the basis of human experience? The answer to this apparent problem is that God's word is certainly not subjected to criticism based on our experience – only our *talk* about his word is open to criticism and needs to be tested. It is not God who is called to account but human beings, on the basis of the totally human, complex structure of the religious experience at issue in religious propositions.

Because of this complex structure (briefly outlined in III, 1 and 2 above) the entirety of revelation alone is not 'God's word'; it is interpreted in a long series of events, experiences and expositions, recollections and new experiences, all located in varying and diverse philosophical models in a 'learning', projective human activity. Revelation – the ineffable, the ground of faith that moves believers to action and thought − comprehends not only religious experience but also interpretations, projects and models, always in individual and collective socio-cultural situations. That makes revelation as perceived experientially and verbally interpreted by believers a thoroughly human historical, even geographically situated event, yet one that does not owe its sustaining foundation to itself.

Criticism of existing Christian religious ideas also has theological grounds. After all, absolute identification with the church, which 'transmits' Jesus' story and praxis to us while remaining a church of saints and sinners, even of sanctified sinners, is neither possible nor permissible, because it would imply identifying with sin and heresy as well. Even uncritical identification with Jesus is not really feasible. For even if the graphic example of Jesus' human life optimally permits practical identification with God's solidarity with humans, the historical Jesus still comes to us as someone from the first century of our calendar, who lived in the intellectual and affective world of his day according

to notions peculiar to the ancient world and foreign to ours. This foreignness cannot be overcome purely theoretically by what is known as re-actualising interpretation, but rather by practically emulating Jesus' orientation and inspiration in new, contemporary experiences and value orientations.

This is not to deny the demonstrable presence of 'eternally human', fundamentally similar basic experiences in all cultures. But they always and only occur in divergent socio-cultural, economic and historical settings. For all these reasons the authority of Christian experience is only apparent in a *reciprocal* theoretical and practical critical correlation between apostolic and early Christian experience and present-day experience, in which we, albeit in contemporary, altered socio-political and cultural situations, identify as Christians with Jesus' message and praxis.

V. EXPERIENCE OF MEANING, TRUTH AND REALITY OR BEING

1. The question of universal meaning

Not only in human thought but also in historical reality per se the question of universal meaning is as rationally inescapable as it is insoluble.[34] After all, real history happens wherever sense and nonsense exist side by side, overlap or intermingle, where there is joy and suffering, laughter and tears – finitude. Because of the continual sabotage of all meaningless suffering the conjunction of sense and meaninglessness in our history – its very fibre − cannot be rationalised in a coherent *theoretical* project. What one can say is that particular meaningful experiences are only logically possible on the basis of their inherent, logically implicit demand for universal meaning. But the logical implication of a question in no way means that universal history must possess final, positive meaning, nor does the logical question theoretically and logically explain the surplus of folly and evil in the world. Logic, meaning and facticity, histories of meaninglessness, injustice and suffering are locked in an insoluble contradiction which cannot be overcome theoretically. Hence theoretical reason cannot anticipate any universal, total meaning of history. Besides, since its evolution is still incomplete, even every particular experience of meaning is subject to *theoretically* insoluble, fundamental scepticism.

Thus meaning is appraised by *practical* reason. But how? As a history of meaning or salvation history it is not a history without human subjects, who in fact are often borne down by suffering and meaninglessness. The universal meaning of history cannot be coerced by logical totality, not if it is to be free, human history. Its meaning cannot be tied down idealistically or materialistically according to an evolutionary logic, as if the real-life histories

[34] Schillebeeckx 1975, 542-554.

of suffering humans ultimately count for nothing. Human reason invariably comes up against the inexplicable surplus of suffering and meaninglessness. To speak theoretically about an ultimate, total meaning of history in fact implies callousness towards its global and personal dramas and catastrophes. In this respect one may have to concede Hans Albert's point when he speaks about the *Mythos der totalen Vernunft* (in the sense of theoretical reason).[35] But contrary to Albert's claim this does not invalidate the concept of totality. In any particular experience of meaning the relation between the part and the whole, considered logically inevitable throughout a long hermeneutic tradition, can hardly be denied as a rational problem.[36] But the inescapable problem posed by a purely theoretical analysis of the universal meaning of history, a totality of meaning implicit in every particular experience, is grounded in the actual process of historical experience, which is not completed and moreover confronts us with catastrophic meaninglessness. Hence any analysis of universal meaning must have a practical, critical intention. Only a particular liberating praxis can clear the way for total meaning. That is to say, total meaning can only be actualised in historical experience, it cannot be predetermined by a theoretical prolepsis. This suggests that speaking about a total, universal meaning of history is impossible if one fails to take account of a particular practice that seeks to make all human beings free subjects of a living history without prejudice to anyone. In anamnesis the 'waste matter of history', which theoretical reason fails to grasp, remains an intelligible force, a cognitive stimulus in the spine of 'practical reason', which – if it wants to remain rational – is thus driven to liberating action.

2. Christian experiential tradition as a practical anticipation of universal meaning

In its prayerful, liberating praxis (whether faithful or otherwise) the Christian experiential tradition as a living recollection of the message, life, death and resurrection of Jesus confessed as the Christ can inspire and focus practical reason. Christian experiential tradition does not consider humankind to be lord of our world – God alone is Lord of history. It sees the praxis of God's kingdom as the future of all humans, already actualised in Jesus' words and deeds, a practical anticipation of a universal kingdom of righteousness, peace and love of and for everybody, with God as the living centre and cohesive factor of a solidary community. In this tradition the hoped for, as yet unsurmised sought-after reality – expressed in the New Testament in powerful images like kingdom of God, universal fellowship, heavenly banquet, freedom of God's children, universal reign of righteousness and peace – is not some

[35] H. Albert, *Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie (soziol. Texte*, 58, Luchterhand), 1969, 193-124.
[36] Pannenberg 1973, 201.

vague, completely unrealised utopia, nor a theoretical anticipation of a total meaning of history. Instead it is demonstrated concretely and proleptically in an existential praxis: that of Jesus, whose person, message and praxis, despite the historical ignominy of the crucifixion, was divinely affirmed through his resurrection as God's kingdom in practice: salvation for all humankind. In the story of his life historical defeat and the concomitant suffering acquire distinctive, intelligible meaning and power – which cannot, however, be pinned down theoretically or cognitively – for humankind's long search for truth and goodness, righteousness and meaning. But in the Christian confession Jesus represents a non-theoretical, practical anticipation of the 'new world', which offers salvation also to evildoers, sufferers and the vanquished, even to the dead. Over against the praxis of the world and criticism of heaven, already prevalent in his time, Jesus posits the praxis of the kingdom of God. Thus the sought-after 'good world' for everybody is anticipated – albeit in the conditions of the old world – in the story of Jesus' life and execution, which therefore not only inspires but also, because of its specific content transcending all pragmatism, orients the conduct of Christians in this world.

The universality of Christian salvation, the subject matter of the Christian experiential tradition, *offers* everybody salvation, enabling them to actualise, by following Jesus, salvation and liberation for all people. The salvation founded in Christ that Christians see as a promise to everyone is universal, not communicated via some abstract universal idea, but by the sheer force of its cognitive, critical and liberating character in and through consistent 'praxis of God's kingdom'. Hence it is not a purely speculative, theoretical universality but one that can only be realised in our history by spreading the story of Jesus the Christ and by Christian praxis. That is why J.-B. Metz – rightly – repeatedly refers to the narrative, practical 'essence' of Christianity.[37] The promised salvation founded in Jesus or 'total meaning' is not to be seen as a 'transcendental' omnipresence of the gospel. It is a *historical* presence of Christian inspiration and orientation via the story of Jesus and – in imitation of him – our concrete historical praxis of liberation, which experiences living communion with God as the source and ground of total human freedom: salvation not merely for a particular, privileged class, not merely for the living or those still alive at the time, but for *everyone* − outcasts, the oppressed and ultimately the dead, those whom our society has declassed and marginalised.

3. Experience of meaning and experience of truth

Does this Christian view subordinate truth to praxis? Particularly since the Enlightenment the concept of universal truth has been detached from its essential historicity and from individual subjects: in a different way to the

[37] See especially Metz 1977, passim.

Greek conception of truth, it nonetheless became truth-in-itself. But universal truth means only that it applies to all human subjects and not just to the intellectually and (as a result) socially and economically privileged. That has fundamental implications for the concept of truth.

One has to concur with the whole of analytical philosophy that only meaningful utterances are candidates for truth or untruth. Hence meaning and truth are distinct. But this view, too, needs correction. On the basis of his own theological project W. Pannenberg affirms the distinction, but adds, rightly, that the truth question is not really an external appendage to the question of meaning.[38] Reality is discussed by experiencing subjects, hence such talk relates not merely to reality but also to subjects. It is aimed at universal consensus, otherwise it is not really universal, that is truth *überhaupt.* And in that case total meaning encompassing all experience definitely coincides with revealed truth; after all, it excludes no experience that can render the truth of the experienced meaning problematic:[39] in an all-encompassing totality of meaning experience of *meaning* and experience of *truth* coincide. Yet without contradicting the ultimate convergence of meaning, relevance and truth, I feel a subtle qualification is called for. I have already conceded that on reflection particular experiences of meaning logically include the question of total meaning, yet at the same time actual history is in no way coerced by a logic of totality. Real-life history is a train of particular histories of sense and many particular histories of nonsense, not to be reconciled by any logical theoretical project. That implies that truly liberating, existentially relevant truth, hence the convergence of experience of meaning and experience of truth, are governed by the cognitive, critical and liberating power of recollections and histories of suffering, which, having been taken seriously by practical reason, trigger a highly specific liberating praxis.[40] Only through such praxis does truth become universal, applicable not only to a handful of privileged people – of bourgeois or socialist persuasion – but for everyone and everybody. Here one might fairly observe: 'Where do you find something that is relevant to all subjects, also to the dead and the vanquished?'[41] This universally liberating praxis is not a superstructure retrospectively imposed on or a mere consequence of a truth already theoretically acknowledged as universal: it is the *historical transmission of a manifestation of truth* as universal truth applicable to all people.

4. In orthopraxis orthodoxy itself is at stake

In this line one could say that in orthopraxis the historical manifestation of orthodoxy is very much at stake. Truth, if it wants to be universal – hence true

[38] Pannenberg 1973, 219.
[39] Pannenberg 1973, 219f.
[40] Also see Metz 1977.
[41] Ibid. 57.

– is also transmitted in practice, including socio-political practice. That introduces the theory-praxis dialectics into the debate. From the angle of the Christian faith, however, this modern problem acquires distinctive meaning. Although the Christian religion has a cognitive power of its own, which, following Jesus, is historically manifested in the life of the churches (albeit not without ups and downs), this cognitive, critical and liberating power cannot be identified with the cognitive power of a theory or a theoretical anticipation of universal meaning. The Christian 'foundational narrative of Jesus' – his life, death and resurrection and the account of the *sequela Jesu* – is not a theoretical anticipation of universal meaning but his history, the story of trust and hope founded in him, which manifests itself historically, as it did in Jesus, in a message of universal justice and peace for everybody in solidary praxis that seeks to realise a non-coercive society for each and every human being. In concrete terms this faith – the substance of which is ultimately a hope rather than a theory ("Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for", Heb. 11:1) – is also faith as praxis, at least if we are not to reduce the Christian religion to purely intellectual acceptance of certain religious tenets, articulated moreover in religious propositions (and as such requiring some sort of testing – a problem we shall not dwell on here). However, at this level, traditionally known as that of *fides quae*, one can hardly assert that a praxis that is either consonant or incompatible with the substance of faith will determine the truth value of those religious propositions. Theoretical ideologies also have adherents whose praxis is true to and consistent with the theory they espouse, but this in no way determines the validity of that theory. Otherwise the dogged persistence with which some people clung to, for example, Nazi ideology would prove its truth.

The real question at issue concerns the primacy of the Christian story and Christian praxis: *faith* (or rather, the level of *fides qua*) as opposed to categories of the theory-praxis problem. And in my view that entails the claim that active faith as solidary hope for everyone – religious praxis of prayer and liberating action – becomes the basis for any further theological and interdisciplinary theorising. From a Christian point of view liberating religious praxis demands more rather than less critical theoretical analyses,[42] based on the inherent cognitive and critical liberating power of the Christian story (and not of some 'theory'). The critical correlation referred to above (see IV/3) implies a genuinely critical integration of theory and praxis. Ultimately the correlation between the Christian faith, with its own narrative practical structure and concomitant critical liberating power on the one hand, and 'present-day experiences' and modern society on the other can only function effectively on

[42] M.L. Lamb 1976, 111.

the basis of a praxis that seeks to realise salvation for all and thus bring a truth that is universal (not merely for currently or future privileged people). Finally this also means that the aporias that beset the current theory-praxis debate – in either an idealistic or historical materialistic sense – stem from disregard of the unique intelligible, critical and liberating power that is not peculiar, hence not reducible, to the cognitive power of theoretical, contemplative knowledge or the no less cognitive power of manipulative (i.e. controlling) praxis, but as an intelligible power peculiar to the story of a 'pathic' praxis, especially to the real-life histories of perfectly real-life people.[43] To Christians that human story is 'exemplified' by the *memoria vitae et passionis Jesu Christi*, which, in the interpretive faith in Jesus' resurrection from the dead as the confirmation by the living God, acquires an intelligible, albeit non-theoretical, critical and liberating power of its own. Only the ongoing history of humankind will demonstrate to the forum of rational thought whether either an idealistic or a materialistic dialectics of freedom will turn out to have significantly less liberating power than that emanating from upholding the religious story of Jesus the Christ and his consistent praxis.

VI. POSSIBILITY OF REAL RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF MODERN SOCIETY

1. A one-sided culture impoverishes human experience

From the foregoing it is evident that a culture in which science and technology are the dominant values can 'impoverish' people's experience and thus diminish the chances of religious experience. Faith is a special form of perceptual experience. But in a one-sided achiever culture of barter and consumption a huge chunk of reality may fall beyond our experiential scope, for then the techno-scientific tradition becomes the experiential horizon and interpretive framework. But that would also give rise to all kinds of protest, sometimes veiled, against the prevailing one-dimensional culture, expressing equally human alternative existential possibilities, especially non-domineering, aesthetic, contemplative, playful and 'pointless' experiences.

Both in the East and the West, and increasingly in the so-called Third World as well, people are living in societies that are becoming more and more anonymous, pragmatised and functionalised with escalating bureaucracies. To many this leads to reduced socio-emotional interpersonal contact, disorientation, the loss of once self-evident social legitimisation of traditional views and values. All this inevitably has a retroactive effect on fundamental

[43] Schillebeeckx 1977, 800-804.

social relations that are the precondition for individuals' social experience, and ultimately for meaningful experiences such as Christian religious experience.

2. Social conditions for handing down a living Christian experiential tradition

Considering these modern social conditions one could ask whether the church can still effectively transmit its evangelical experiential tradition in such an altered environment − in other words, the question whether modernity permits new Christian religious experiences or, in religio-sociological terms, the problem of religious socialisation of Christian contents**.** Traditional, classical forms of religious socialisation or transmission of Christian content to current and future generations have become virtually ineffective as a result of the secularised, anonymous and extremely pluralistic state of our society. Sociologists maintain that the plausibility structures for possible Christian religious experience have disappeared. Hence in modern situations transmission of the legacy representing the Christian inspiration and orientation will have to rely on alternative forms of socialisation. Accordingly grassroots communities are increasingly becoming agencies for transmitting the gospel. Consequently modern individual and collective religious experience are becoming highly selective. There are practically no religious experiences that represent the full spectrum of the Judaeo-Christian experiential tradition. This situation also causes some conflict, or at any rate alienation, between grassroots groups and the official churches. The latter often forget that the official transmission of the Christian heritage was and remains equally selective. The dominant ecclesiology likewise presents a particular scheme that, compared to the tradition as a whole, is highly selective: it is marked by specific accents and undisclosed truths. Transmission of the fullness of the Christian inspiration and orientation in complex modern social structures is seemingly feasible only by way of a versatile plurality of presentations of Christian religious experience – apparently the only chance of religious socialisation of the full scope of the Christian faith in modern times. In a complex society like ours what the official churches often see as non-practising or even de-Christianised people or marginal church members (i.e. pluralistic experience of the one faith) is rather the only real condition for transmitting the unabridged fullness of the Christian inspiration and orientation of the gospel. In the present-day socio-cultural situation a uniform – hence unavoidably selective, one-sided – form of Christianity is certainly not favourable for transmitting the fullness of the gospel. In their experience of the Christian inspiration and orientation many Christian groups distance themselves from the official, equally selective representation of the evangelical legacy. Sociologically, a uniform manifestation of Christianity concentrates mainly on its capacity for social integration. But in modern, anonymous,

pluralistic social contexts that misfires badly. At worst this strategy would turn the church into a subcultural ghetto. Considering the positive value orientations to be found also in modern society this approach has, sociologically speaking, no future in our time.

Another dysfunctional (i.e. detrimental to effective transmission of the Christian experiential tradition) factor, from a sociological point of view, is the discrepancy between intra-ecclesiastic policy (that still adheres to a patriarchal pattern) and value orientations acquired in present-day civil, social and political life. There are clear signs that modern societies do not permit effective transmission of the Christian legacy without the involvement and active participation of all believers. This sociological finding corresponds with the insight gained during Vatican II that the entire church as a community of believers is the active subject of the living religious tradition, not just the official church. If the latter were to appoint itself the sole subject of this tradition it would create a rift between the mainline churches and Christian grassroots groups, especially in modern societies. In itself the rift need not entail any impoverishment of the gospel on account of the 'modernity' of present-day societies; it is primarily a matter of the socio-cultural conditions for effective transmission of the Christian legacy. Transmission of Christian religious contents – which is what it is ultimately about – does not happen so much through official proclamation of doctrines, dogma and all kinds of axioms, but rather through the real scope for practical identification with individuals and groups in which fundamental facets of the Christian inspiration and orientation have been actively realised and, because of that, offer others meaning in life. Only then does transmission stand a chance, which will be all the greater the more Christian-oriented and inspired groups present themselves to the world in their diversity and complementarity. After all, no one group or individual – be it the official church, the pope or some grassroots community – can represent the gospel *in its explicit fullness*. A multiplicity of grassroots communities in inner and outward, mutually affirmative commitment in their very diversity would therefore be optimally conducive to Christian religious experience in modern, complex societies, as long as the essential mystical and political structure of the faith is recognised. The history of theology and Christian spirituality tells us that this has always been the case in the lives of the churches. The so-called ideal of a uniform church (which is, albeit in camouflaged fashion, highly selective when it comes to the fullness of the Christian legacy) is itself the outcome of socio-cultural circumstances, which also explains Vatican I. The ideal of uniformity is not a true reflection of the actual history of the faith from New Testament times through those of the churches that grew from it. A discrepancy between

congregational faith and the church's official doctrine, in varying forms, is a hallmark of the whole of church history, not just a 'modern' phenomenon.

3. *Religious praxis offers a historical and social basis for Christian interpretive experiential tradition*

The current identity and legitimisation crisis of what we call 'the church', then, is partly associated with socio-cultural changes in our society, and partly with inadequate practical identification of church members with the fundamental impulses of the gospel under the conditions of our complex modern societies with all their inner contradictions. The point is that this modern situation should be viewed critically as a new opportunity for Christianity: in particular it should not remain a **'**welfare religion**'** *for* the populace, presented from on high to people who no longer perceive it in the 'profane' world, but should become a religion *of* the people.[44] This calls for collegial – and synodal – leadership in the religious community, under brotherly guidance from the incumbent of Peter's chair, as well as mutual criticism of religious communities among themselves in order to 'discern the spirits' and ensure the freedom of *everyone* in the church. In the process the accent is not on the church and preserving its treasure as its private property, but on the preservation of the evangelical inspiration and orientation for the salvation of all people. The religious community is the transmitter of that salvation, that is the wholeness of all people. This fundamental impulse of the gospel will give modern Christian religious experience a different slant from that of recent centuries, in which faith was mainly intra-ecclesiastic and – by extension – confined to closed ecclesiastic social organisations. Healing the divide between the 'specifically religious sphere' and the alien 'outside world' will definitely have a fundamental influence on future Christian religious experience. But it can also expose Christians to renewed situations of real-life martyrdom, because Christian foundational experience quite often entails protest against 'the ways of this world' and its 'powers', which out of self-interest will take counter measures. Thus the question of the conditions of Christian religious experience in modern times is not purely 'hermeneutic' in the sense of theoretically correct exposition of Scripture and tradition, but also concerns the special praxis of believers that provides a historical and social basis for such correct exegesis and moreover makes it plausible. The point at issue is whether religious experience, in the sense of 'Christian faith**',** is possible today and, especially with a view to societal preconceptions and transmission of meaningful experience, can be made possible without retreating into the private sphere. The latter implies a need to expose those elements in modern society that

[44] J.-B. Metz 1977, 120-135.

impoverish human experience. Here a practical critical correlation between Christian faith and 'modernity' is particularly pertinent. Since it offers salvation to *all,* the Christian faith includes a will to political change when socio-economic structures impede access to universal salvation for some people and groups or use Christianity as opium for the masses. In other words, in such cases religious praxis has to create its own preconditions and not adapt uncritically to existing social circumstances. Thus modern Christians face a concrete *choice*: a disinterested choice for the oppressed – disinterested because it is prompted by solidary hope for everyone and everybody. Because Jesus' life task was primarily aimed at gathering together all Israel without exception, he showed special concern for tax collectors and sinners, the poor and the handicapped, who were excluded from that society: the marginalised – while at the same time he himself was rejected by the powers that be. But we must not forget that this predilection is a *consequence* of something deeper, his actual message and life task: universal salvation for everyone and everybody, assembling everybody in a solidary society in which the living God is the cohesive factor.

VII. HUMAN EXPERIENCE AND THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The foregoing could give rise to the (mis)conception that experiences of revelation – including Christian and religious ones – are purely human, in the sense that they are fully understandable without any initiative from God and his salvific will, that is without grace and the work of the Holy Spirit. Nothing could be further from the truth. The preceding analysis 'from below' is meant to make it quite clear that, considering present-day people's individual and collective experience of faith, we can never 'get away' with a supernaturalist or fideistic interpretation of such experiences, as if the Holy Spirit were but one of any number of factors that could be added to the list of human factors. Instead our analysis (see especially II/2) shows that the Holy Spirit is active throughout as a mysterious, ineffable depth dimension. What we have described in terms of human experience still has to be put into *religious language,* but in a way that shows that religious and ecclesiastic talk becomes vacuous and pointless if it contains no recognisable reference to real-life human experiences with other people in the everyday world.

Patristic and medieval tradition described grace mainly as *lumen fidei* (light of faith), the light of grace that 'attracts' us to faith. They call it an inward illumination or *instinctus* of God that induces faith.[45] By virtue of this light the religious teachings that the church presents in its proclamation is affirmed in a

[45] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 2, a. 9 ad 3; also his *Comm. in Joh.*, VI, lect. 5; *Quodlib*. II, 6, 1; in III *Sent. d*. 23, q. 2, a. 1 ad 4.

personal religious experience by listeners who have been rendered receptive by this illuminating power. Tradition sees the act of believing, inasmuch as it is not mere acceptance of religious propositions but a personal experience of or trust in the invisible reality of a self-revealing God, as grace freely affirmed by human beings. Such speech in religious language is by no means a redundant luxury or ideological talk about something that can be adequately grasped on purely profane grounds. I have already said that universally human, so-called everyday events ('that was a revelation to me!') would be impossible without sympathetic openness and disinterested accommodation on the part of the observer. To Christians, who are familiar with the sinful, egotistical propensities of human beings, such radically disinterested openness spells redemptive grace that puts the human heart on the same wavelength as that which is concretely manifested in the historical Jesus and the church's account of him. Faith is a conversion experience.

Since for us the dualism of outwardness and inwardness has become a problem, we can, however, no longer meaningfully locate the light of faith referred to in Christian tradition in the split reality of 'God's inward speech' (light of faith) on the one hand and on the other the church's proclamation of *credibilia* (the Christian religious tradition). Inner freedom, we have learnt from bitter experience, must include encounters of free people in social structures that permit and safeguard freedom. The social dimension is an essential component of inwardly free acts. As a result the freedom granted to us by grace transcends the dualistic distinction between inward and outward and its theological counterpart: the dualistically conceived distinction between 'inner' and 'outward' grace. From a purely sociological point of view it has been found that historical personal identity soon crumbles if it receives no social recognition and personal conviction loses its social plausibility structures. From a religious point of view that is also the sociological significance of the church's account and praxis of God's kingdom: the church provides the Christian faith with plausibility structures. If not, believers leave their church. Many contemporary believers seek salvation – often not without reason – in core or grassroots communities that do have a plausibility structure. The church is − that is, it *ought to be* − a free and liberating environment in which Christian personal identity can flourish. Seen thus, the church in its true *sequela Christi* is the fundamental grace that individuals internalise, socialise and appropriate in their religious experience. God's grace in the sense of his saving presence among people is not a separate sector of inwardness but encompasses – in different gradations of revelational density – the entire reality in which we live and which we are, and in which Christ's churches have to be the 'sacrament of the world'. Only in this environment can experiences of (human) salvation given in Jesus in a human form and a human way be experienced as

divine salvation: the manifestation and realisation in human history of the universal salvific will of God as the God of human beings. Only a perception that sees creation and covenant as distinct can explain revelational or religious experiences in a way that avoids both fideism and supernaturalism and in which liberating faith 'that overcomes the world' (1 Jn 5:4) is nonetheless experienced as a sheer gift of God. 'For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness' (Gal 5:5). The ultimate revelation of meaning, truth and reality, offered to all people as something given in advance in the story and consistent praxis of Christianity, is also a gift from the Lord of history, received for free by 'faith active in love' (Gal 5:6) – certainly not the result of a historically coercive teleology. The revelation offered in the Christian story, ultimately, is a blessing that has the structure of a *historical experience.*

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Chapter 2

THE SEARCH FOR THE LIVING GOD

Theology, which claims God himself as its subject, has every reason to be modest nowadays, since everywhere his nonexistence is proclaimed as an almost existential experience.[1] As a result we are compelled to circumscribe more exactly the area in which theology, as faith which has become science, establishes contact with the reality of God.

At one time there was a naive assumption that the unknown was equivalent to this reality. Whenever science came up against a barrier and found its advance halted by something incomprehensible people were immediately inclined to bring in the name of God. Because the natural sciences and man's knowledge of his own psyche were not particularly far advanced this sort of thing happened frequently; and as the unknown was equated with God—though perhaps not primarily by the scientists themselves—in accordance with the custom of the time God was very much in the centre of man's thought. But with the great progress of science and technology in our own day what was formerly put down to God is now more and more ascribed to mundane causes. A well-known humanist, Doctor J.P. van Praag, has observed—not particularly felicitously perhaps, and even somewhat unacademically—that unchurchedness has increased "since the invention of artificial fertilizers."[2]

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[1] From the copious literature on this subject we refer the reader to the following books and articles: L. Casserley, *De ontkerstening van de moderne wereld*, Bruges, 1954; H. Urs von Balthasar, *De moderne mens op zoek naar God,* Bruges, 1957; K. Rahner, *Christendom en Kerk in onze tijd*, Bruges, 1955, and 'Wissenschaft als "Konfession" '?, in: *Schriften zur Theologie* III, Einsiedeln, 1956, 455-472. Also to be consulted on atheism: F. Jeanson, 'Athéisme et liberté,' in: *Lumière et Vie* 13 (1954), 85-96; J. Lacroix, 'Sens et valeur de l'athéisme actuel,' in: *Esprit* 22 (1954), 167-191; M. Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*, Evanston, Ill., 1963; G. Siegmund, *Der Kampf um Gott*, Berlin, 1957; P. Rostenne, *La foi des athées*, Paris, 1953; A. Etcheverry, *Le conflit actuel des humanismes*, Paris, 1955; R. Jolivet, 'Le problème de l'Absolu dans la philosophie de M. Merleau-Ponty,' in : *Tijdschrift voor Philosophie* 19 (1957), 53-100; J. Maritain, *La signification de l'athéisme contemporain*, Paris-Bruges, 1949; A. Dondeyne, *Foi chrétienne et pensée contemporaine*, Leuven, 1951; H. de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, New York, 1950; *Monde moderne et sens de Dieu* (Semaine des intellectuels catholiques 1953), Paris, 1954.

[2] This is a lecture given at the Nederlands Gesprek Centrum in Oosterbeek, February 7th and 8th, 1958. (A short account of the proceedings is in De Tijd, February 10, 1958, 4.)

Now this perspective of the coming of age of science undoubtedly explains the decrease of a certain need for God, even if it is not in itself sufficient to invalidate the need itself. This laicization of science may be regarded as a good thing for religion, since by definition God is a reality which evades the exact sciences. Even the unknown in science can never be equated with God.

Moreover, formerly God was quite often regarded as a function of our human life. Man was not regarded as standing in a religious relationship to God, but the other way round. God, in fact, was reduced to the status of an idol in the service of man. God and his Church were expected to provide what science and technology are now in a position to provide abundantly: a more comfortable and materially happier life on this earth, and a society worthy of human beings. Nowadays the world can provide itself with all this, thanks to its own technological progress, and quite obviously it can do so far more generously than the prayers of former times ever could. It is therefore not surprising that there are many people who feel that we no longer need God. Despite this, the process of laicization is a good thing. To take the domain of psychology, where, for example, the mentally deranged can be helped more effectively by the psychiatrist than they can by the priest, this particular form of laicization helps to remove the clutter from the real sphere in which the search for God must be situated.

And this is not all. Looking back in history, we can find repeated examples of how a measure of humanitarianism originally due to religion, and arising in the first place from religious conviction, is transferred to the world, and there, naturally, laicized. An obvious example: when his consciousness was still young and vestigial man did not sense that a sick person had a right to be looked after and cared for by society. This sensitivity arose out of religion; evangelical love took pity on the weak. The evangelical spirit compensated for the lack of moral human insight. Nowadays the situation is altogether different: people regard it as a matter of course that society and its state should concern themselves with such matters. In other words, we have arrived at a stage in which Christian charity has been secularized; and in its laicized form it has now struck deep roots into human consciousness —so much so that social welfare takes on the form of an inalienable human right. What formerly sprang from Christian charity as a work of benevolence has become such an everyday affair in our own time that people regard it as a normal human right. In its secularized form this part of what was formerly Christian charity is now known as "social justice." Thus what was done at one time by the religious man out of his religious philanthropy is being progressively translated to the profane, the human sphere, where, laicized and humanized, it continues to exist under a new and more worldly name.

This particular form of laicization edges religion out of a certain essentially worldly sphere, but this is not necessarily a bad thing, or in itself a loss. On the contrary, we can even regard it as a definite gain, as a fruit of the redemption. This translation of values means no more than that this or that profoundly human outlook, or way of life, which was at one time necessarily the fruit of a religious belief in God, has now grown beyond the sphere of the Church and has become a generally acknowledged human achievement. Redeeming grace, the theme of Christianity, has become a secular reality in Christ and his Church; it has spread, and is still spreading, in all directions. It has influenced Western thought and behaviour for centuries. The specific consequences of the evangelical spirit which appeared miraculous and unparalleled twenty centuries ago have been so thoroughly socialized, so interiorized in the secular world-outlook of mankind, that the profoundly humane pronouncements of the staunchest modern atheist concerning love and justice towards his fellow human beings would be unthinkable without the historical premise of Christianity—on which, in the meantime, man is turning his back. Secularized it remains a boon for humanity, even for Christianity as such. For this secularization means only that the core of religiousness lies *elsewhere,* although it will always be expressed in our worldly life. This suggests also that when we believers acknowledge the requirements of social justice, in our present situation this does not yet mean that we are exercising Christian charity. The more intensively this secularization is carried out, the stronger the evangelical demands on our lives will become and the more radiant the true face of Christian holiness, because the religious background against which formerly these supplementary functions became understandable cannot itself be secularized. What the world assimilates from the religious life, and then often carries out in a secularized form better and more efficiently than religion could formerly, when modern technical means were simply not available, is in the last resort something that secular mankind ought to have found out for itself, but which, because of the very slow and gradual development of its consciousness, and above all because of its naturally unregenerate nature, it actually reached only in the light of religious experience.

In all this, secularization, and in this sense the absence of God, represents a plus rather than a minus factor. It does no more than indicate the worldly maturity of modern man, who has taken the ordering of this secular sphere into his own hands. When the supplementary functions of religion in the world gradually fall away altogether (though there is a certain element of utopianism about this perspective since mankind clearly chooses to remain in an unregenerate condition) the proper soil of religion in the heart of man will necessarily reveal itself even more significantly. Then it will clearly be seen that in its primary intention religion is superior to all secular affairs, and that

from a secular technological standpoint God is, indeed, a useless hypothesis. Man does not need God in order to find his way about in this world, and it is therefore a sphere in which modern man no longer misses God.

Even human history does not show us God. Precisely because he demonstrates his effective presence in this world in it his own way, he seems to be absent. He is, after all, totally different from all experienced reality. On the natural level, we experience him precisely as the one who exceeds all experience. Man can thus reach out to God only as to someone who is absent from the normal totality of created things. The transcendent significance he gives to history is beyond any of our conceptions of human finality and purpose precisely because of its transcendence. Indeed, history strikes us as lacking sense in any human understanding of the word. This is, in fact, so much the case that history looks to us like a motley collection of arrant nonsense complicated by abrasive suffering. Thus all appearances speak against the existence of God. Our human insight finds it impossible to justify his providence. In consequence some people regard the idea of divine providence as the utmost absurdity, more absurd certainly than a flagrant denial of his existence. Where man is concerned God is powerless precisely because of the divinity of his existence, which can manifest itself only in absence. It is precisely the divine nature of his presence and his activity that makes him seem absent from us.

Whenever we try to grasp and take hold of God as an object we find ourselves still in this finite world and never in the presence of God. However, there are forms of presence which draw our attention only as the result of a certain orientation of a conscious ignorance. We are concerned with a purely personal presence which can nevertheless not be situated amongst all those other things that manifest themselves to us directly by their presence. The impossibility of our accounting for our existence ourselves, and the fundamental experience of our wholly contingent presence in this world, brings us face to face with the invisible but real mystery of a personal Giver whose heart is greater than his gifts which surround us and of which we ourselves form part. Divine liberality forms the intangible background of our inner and outer world whose reality and contingency constantly betrays its vital source, but which always stands in the gap between him and us. Only when man shows sufficient courage to see himself and the world truthfully, as a fact, as a reality thrown at his feet, as a presence in itself unexplainable, can he begin to regard this tangible presence as the evidence of a very different Presence manifesting itself in an indirect fashion therein. Only when we face the world in our simple quality as human beings—as neither *homo faber* nor *homo oeconomicus*—and approach these realities in their simple, artless truth, can we realize our secure existence in a deeper mystery of a personal absolute

freedom. But to this end we must first accept the fact that truth is something more than man's eager grasp on tangible data. The natural affirmation of God's existence is no more than a critically confirmed affirmation on the basis of this world of our secure existence in the personal mystery of God, a mystery, however, that we cannot encounter on that same basis. Any arrogant attempt to seize God's presence merely confines us still more definitely in the isolation of our life in this world since it deprives us of that interiority which is secured only when we become conscious of ourselves within the security of the divine creative mystery. When God reveals his presence to us only through the act in which he founds our existence, whilst remaining transcendent even in this act,[3] this means that he is there not *because* we exist, although it is only through our own existence that we have come to realize his divine existence; it means that we are there only as a function of him. Thus the natural affirmation of God's existence is completed only in the willing surrender to the divine mystery which lies at the accepted origin of what we experience in this world. In this sense the existential experience of God's absence, combined with our own profound interest in the inner problematics of man's own existence and that of the world, represents the "experience" of our secure being in an all-embracing mystery of transcendental but personal love. In this love we would willingly take a personal part, but in the nature of things we cannot, although on the basis of the creative act through which God draws our attention, as an essential requirement of our existence, to his presence as a loving person, we already have an inner consciousness of his *appeal to surrender*.

The direct personal relationship with the divine mystery of life, and in consequence the actual religiousness in which the presence of God develops into mutuality and encounter, becomes possible, however, only when God, acting from beyond the cloud of that mystery in which we already consciously exist, completes what he began in his creative act, and begins talking to us as one person speaks to and treats another. In the natural affirmation of God man has already come to realize that although in free relationship to the world he is not, in the last resort, of this world, though he is not on his own able to give a *personal* significance to this free relationship which transcends the world. Regarded as the absolute bedrock of human and objectively unlimited freedom, God necessarily eludes all merely human attempts at understanding. But God himself now personally accomplishes this miracle, since it is precisely at that point where man faces the world in free subjectivity that he is directly approached by the living God in order that he may rise above himself, step outside himself, and live in personal intimacy with God. This supramundane personal loneliness of human freedom is just the point at which the question of personal communion with God arises, because it is there, at the summit of his

[3] D. De Petter, *Werkelijkheid en begrip*, Hilversum-Antwerp, 1964, 150-167.

transcendence over his worldly relationship, that on the basis of God's creation, and precisely because of his freedom, man is directly attuned to the mystery of the living God, even though he is incapable of reaching it by his own resources. By its very nature, therefore, religion is a personal act of human freedom which abandons its lonely outlook and lets itself be taken up by grace into the mutuality of God's presence, and thus into the intimacy of the divine life.

But from this personal communion with the living God we must now retrace the way we have already come, since as a result of this personal communion everything now takes on a much more profound dimension. Thanks to this personal living relationship with God enabling man to step outside himself and outside his earthly relationships towards a personal God, these earthly relationships themselves are given a divine significance. They develop into signs of a closer divine presence, of a presence that develops in mutuality into a personal encounter. For the *religious* man the world of nature and history becomes a passage in his dialogue with God. At the same time it develops into God's instructions to man, and the visible form of God's answer to human prayers.

However, the fact that the world of man's history-creative freedom is now taken into personal living relationship with God also means that within this religious relationship man makes history into salvation or into judgment. Since human freedom is the factor which gives significance to history, intramundane relationships are thus directed and determined by the intimacy in which God and man have found each other, or by the rupture which is brought about when man in his freedom denies his God. In consequence, therefore, the whole of man's profane history is transformed either by the worship of God or by the denial of his existence, since even in his apostasy man remains subject to the living God by a personal transmundane relationship to him.

Thus because it is part and parcel of the divine dialogue man's existence in this world also becomes an anonymous medium of revelation and at the same time a sphere in which religious significances are established. Everywhere, history becomes either salvation or judgment. Despite, or rather *in,* its earthly nature, it also becomes an empirical manifestation of the religious relationship to God in faith or apostasy.

Against this anonymous human religious background the particular solicitude of the living God is seen to manifest itself in the history of a certain people, the people of Israel, as a means through which to prepare his definitive coming in and through the man Jesus, and to develop its significance in the history of man. What from a mundane point of view can be regarded as a merely secular event is something quite different when it is seen from the standpoint of Israel's consciousness of salvation, and therefore as an

experience of God's people—then it turns out to be the historic unfolding of a divine ordinance in which God and man appear as partners in a dialogue, since it is from this personal relationship with the living God that the Jewish people, positively or negatively, makes its own history. From God's standpoint, on the other hand, his creative world ordinance becomes a thematic factor of his personal call to his people for their salvation. Thus God's saving action is made manifest precisely as an intervention in human history. God's saving action itself is revelation—it reveals itself by becoming history, and it shapes history by revealing itself. Here God's saving grace exercises an absolute priority over man's freedom to shape his own history. But at the same time active divine transcendency, which is also creative in its saving intervention, independently embraces man's freedom to make his own history in its providential revelation. Thus in its own specific character, and in its earthly nature, the history of man becomes, so to speak, the material in which and through which God prepares our salvation. In this way revelation implicitly involves the action and reaction of the Jewish people with or against its God. In consequence God's revelation is not a divine monologue only to be listened to, something which, so to speak, could be tape-recorded. The significance of revelation comes to us only from the dialogue between God and his people. By its nature, therefore, revelation as it unfolds itself is something which is both invitation and reply; it is the history of the Jewish people in a covenant relationship with God.

But it follows from this that although revelation lies primarily in the saving action of God and thus in the history of the Jewish people, this history attains the full significance of spoken revelation only as it is experienced in Israel's consciousness of salvation. Only on the basis of this consciousness —namely, the knowledge that the people of Israel are God's people—does Israel understand and interpret its history as the action of God in the lives of its people. Revelation by action and revelation by word are inseparable in God's providential revelation. The divine dialogue in action, which makes history into saving or damning history, is clarified in the words of the prophet, in whom the divine dialogue finds its clearest reflection. The Word reveals the presence and the significance of the saving action of God to his people. Because it is submerged in earthly history this divine saving action even inherently demands the complementary Word. Therefore it is only in the prophetic word, in the word of him who hears and understands the inner voice of God in historical events, that divine revelation comes to full consciousness amongst the chosen people. God does not merely announce the salvation that the Jewish people must represent for themselves and for the rest of the world; he brings it about in history, whose significance moreover he himself must clarify and

interpret in the prophetic word. In this sense saving history is a secular event *interpreted* in the light of the divine dialogue.

We can no longer one-sidedly interpret, say, a breach of the dykes on the coast of Holland simply as a judgment of God on us. The fact is that from the data available about the condition of the dykes, the direction of the storm wind, and the strength of the tide we can very accurately calculate the earthly causes of what happened and discover why it happened. By the time the engineers have finished their calculations there is no gap anywhere which God might fill to execute his judgment on us. However, for man's freedom before the living God this event demands an explanation, and those who experienced it must now integrate it meaningfully into their lives. Such an integration is not brought about by the mere enumeration of earthly causes, for they merely describe the occurrence in itself, which was only the occasion of the *human* problem. Within the framework of a dialogue with the living God this situation is merely a *theme,* and at the same time a *means,* through which God invites man to transcend himself. Seen in a broader perspective, history made by nature and by man according to their own laws becomes something which is offered to man by the living God in order that, actively and creatively, man may give it a religious significance. It is precisely by thus giving significance to their history that the Jewish people as the people of God gave shape to the Old Testament revelation.[4]

Although this Old Testament revelation has a certain independent value as a form of religious experience, nevertheless in the last resort it must be regarded as the prehistory of the Christian revelation, a historical development towards the mystery of Christ, which is itself the centre and *telos* of the whole revelation. The Old Testament story is wholly directed towards this final stage. On the historical plane it prepared the way for the coming mystery of the New

[4] Here we have only touched in a schematic way on the theology of revelation, which is based, among other things, on the way in which God has revealed salvation to man: we cannot enter into its details. We must keep in mind, however, that the prophetic word is capable of interpreting not only past events (such, for example, as the Exodus) but future worldly events of which signs are already discernible. The prophetic word seizes the event and interprets it in its religious significance. So, it seems, Deutero-Isaiah as the contemporary of Cyrus has understood the latter's policy of allowing the exiles to return home, interpreting this future event as a saving intervention of Jahweh, delivering his people; hence the return home became a religious event. In this sense the prophetic word is itself history-making. It can also happen that a future fact really is foretold, so that the factual occurrence in itself can be genuinely experienced as a religious event. Furthermore it is not improbable that the word can "project" history: that is, a religious idea can be externalised in a mythical narrative. The "facts" involved are in that case not historical in the secular sense; rather, they are t*hemata* ("themes"), religious projections in history. They are nonetheless religious realities. (It is possible that Christ's temptations in the desert can be interpreted in this way and likewise other accounts in Holy Scripture.) Moreover, a later history (e.g. the theocratic idea of monarchy after the exile) can be projected into an earlier history (e.g. the monarchy of David). Hence the "theme" of projected religious meaning seems to me to be an important element in the construction of a "theology of revelation."

Testament, since it was along the basic lines of the Old Testament revelation in dialectical relationship with the history of the Jewish people that the living God gradually made known the fundamental meaning of his providential ordinance: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people."[5] Salvation as a typical religious category is ultimately the actual encounter between God and man in mutual trust, because man's freedom to make history his salvation comes about only in historicity. The covenant as mutual trust between God and his people therefore had to be translated in and through the history of that people into actually experienced reality. God's demand to his people was their unwavering trust in all circumstances. Standing in the presence of the God of the covenant, God's people had to interpret the so-called inevitabilities of life with all its ordinary but sometimes painful vicissitudes as the limits within which the living God circumscribed their duty of religious faith from day to day and from moment to moment, calling lovingly on his people in and through all this to confirm their unwavering trust in him, the God of Israel, and thus—with complete confidence in his good guidance—to do what God gave them the inner power to do, without being anxious about either the ultimate outcome or the ultimate sense of it all. They are thus called upon to surrender to the mystery of God as part of their trustful personal community with him. The Old Testament revelation as a whole is the sum of historical events arising out of divine trust on the one hand and the repeated faithlessness of Israel on the other—faithlessness relieved by a number of more favourable phases.

On the historical plane this history is, thanks to the inner power of the covenant, the beginning, so to speak, of the story of the man Jesus, since what Israel as a people failed to do is about to be brought to a definitively good end in him on whom in the messianic sense the fate of the whole of humanity now depends. God, who calls for mutual trust in the covenant, now comes personally in the historical shape of a man to take upon himself the answering trust of humanity in the covenant. The dialogue between God and man which has repeatedly ground to a halt in man now finds a human sounding board in history. The divine invitation to trust in the covenant and the answering human trust both take shape in one and the same person, who stands as a man in our history; and they take shape in such a way that both the divine invitation and the answering human trust constitute themselves fulfilled divine revelation. Thus revelation does not come about one-sidedly even in Christ. Jesus is essentially a dialogue with the Father, a dialogue which enables

[5] Lev. 26:11-12. The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, New York, Nelson 1946, 1952. All scriptural quotations in this article are from this version copyrighted 1946 and 1952 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches. Cf. also Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 31:33; Ez. 11:20; 14:11; 37:27; Hos. 1:9.

him to give significance to his human situation. In and through his loving death as a consequence of his filial attachment to the Father, and in messianic love, this man, rising above himself in sacrifice, dedicated his human life throughout to the Father. The specific significance of the divine ordinance is historically fulfilled in the final story of the man Jesus, and it is only the beginning of a new saving history based on the mystery of Christ glorified. It is in the life of this man that we find the alpha and omega of God's revelation and of all religiousness: it was in a visible human shape that Christ experienced his filial relationship to God in and through this world. The incorporation of man's intramundane relationships into the personal transmundane existence of a child of the living God attains its utmost, so to speak its prototypical, realization here. Thus the man Jesus is the ultimate point of reference for all revelation, for the presence of God, and at the same time for all religiousness, for the mutuality of this presence. In Christ Jesus God is personally amongst us in the full sense of the word. For us Christ is the revelation and the presence of God; and for God the Father he is, by the power of the Spirit, at the same time the man in whom the presence of God develops into mutuality, to our salvation. The Church is the present-day sacrament of this reality amongst us.[6]

Thus we have now briefly indicated the various factors which combine to determine our religious orientation towards the presence of the living God. In this complex unity it is the natural experience of God's presence which forms the basis of the religious presence in mutual intimacy. In view of the mission of theology, which seeks to throw light upon this saving reality, allow me now to point out two important conclusions.

Not in spite of, but to a large extent because of and thanks to, present-day laicization and the emancipation of man's outlook we believers are discovering more clearly than ever before the true dimensions of religion and the security of our human existence in the living God, and rightly so. For the realization that we cannot make direct contact with God either in nature or in ordinary human history is not an argument in favour of atheism, but in a certain respect an expression of reverence towards God; namely, a growing recognition of the fact that God transcends this world; that God is really God, that he is wholly other than the world, and that whenever we come clearly and definitely into contact with something, this reality cannot ever be God himself. All that is there is once again the world.

But there is all the same a certain ambiguity present, since it still remains to be seen whether, when we have once fully circumscribed man's horizon within earthly limits, there can still be room for a religious attitude towards God. Unless it can already be seen from this natural, human standpoint that man,

[6] We only touch upon the ecclesial aspect of the presence of God here, although it is an important one.

although existing in a relationship with the world, is in his real core, which is called freedom, nevertheless not of this world and cannot therefore be described simply as an earthly being, then the supranatural religious orientation of man towards a God revealing himself becomes a priori utterly untenable. In other words, unless there is one, all-embracing dimension of human existence (that can nevertheless not yet be called *grace)* in which the full transcendent being, or the divine reality, is visible at the very source of human experience, then the ground is cut from under the feet of religion in life. And if we nevertheless continue to regard religion as the profoundest truth of our human existence, then by the nature of things religion will find itself in stultifying competition with human life in and of this world. Modern atheist thought recognizes this perhaps more clearly than some Christians do.[7]

It strikes me that in our present-day world of religious apostasy and atheism, which undermine the religious beliefs of both Catholic and non-Catholic Christians, the appeal to independent philosophic thought on the part of the *believer* is a matter of considerable importance for theology. If this is not taken into account, theological thought, which has so manifestly renewed itself in recent years, increasing its profundity both amongst Catholics and Protestants to the great benefit of those within the Churches, will ultimately find itself ignoring that part of humanity which is drifting away from Christianity in such numbers. And the longer this process goes on, the more practising Christians will be drawn into it. Granted that in recent years theological enthusiasm for saving history has renewed the religious life of believers, nevertheless in the present situation theology would renounce its apostolic mission if it were not at the same time capable of more philosophic thought. The two big religious bodies, Catholic and Protestant, are conducting an ecumenical dialogue, but a constantly growing number of human beings—enough to represent a real force—are going their own worldly way, with the result that Christianity is being pushed out of everyday public life onto what can only be regarded as a siding. The present situation of humanity therefore requires that theological thought should do more than institute an inter-Christian ecumenical dialogue; what is also needed is a dialogue with the vast

[7] With regard to a somewhat facile pronouncement of Jacques Maritain, who tends to minimise the difficulties, M. Merleau-Ponty comments: "Indeed Maritain finally comes to justify the continuous criticism of idols as essential to Christianity. The saint, he says, is a 'complete atheist' with respect to a God who would be only the guarantor of the natural order, who would consecrate not only all the world's goodness but all the world's evil as well, who would justify slavery, injustice, the tears of children, the agony of the innocent by sacred necessities, who would finally sacrifice man to the cosmos as 'the absurd Emperor of the world.' The Christian God who redeems the world and is accessible to prayer, according to Maritain, is the active negation of all this. Here, indeed, we are close to the essence of Christianity. The philosopher will only ask himself if the natural and rational concept of God as necessary being is not inevitably that of the Emperor of the world, if without this concept, the Christian God would not cease to be the author of the world…" *In Praise of Philosophy*, Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press, 1963, 47.

world of atheism; or rather, to put it more accurately, with the exponents of that form of religiousness, so widespread today, whose outlook is purely of this world. Included in this is religion without God, a posture which seems all the more attractive because it is courageous and intensely sincere—"authentic." It may have its source in an ineradicable loneliness; nevertheless it strives to the best of its ability in human solidarity, justice and love to give life meaning by a creative commitment to an absurd world, thus at least radiating, on a purely human basis, a little love in one's immediate vicinity.

However, it is not only the apostolic mission of theology which invites us to include secular thought, the way of thinking deriving from man in this world, in its own gospel thinking. The fully personal character of our faith itself in confrontation with the most important phenomenon of our time, namely religious apostasy and atheism, also demands that religious thought should include secular thought in its reflections on the mystery of our salvation. Because we wish to live our Christian belief personally and freely, because we wish to think it personally, and desire in our religiousness to remain sincere towards the real problem of those who think differently—atheistically—this personal honesty and the free personal character of the religious act demand more than ever, and more urgently than ever, that we should resume the critical investigation of what is called *praeambula fidei;* that is to say, of the human person as a constitutive and at the same time important demand for religiousness. Unless there is some way or other in which the mundane problems of our existence as human beings in this world themselves raise the eschatological problem, God's kingdom in all its transcendency cannot satisfactorily adjust itself to the phenomenon of human freedom. Then saving history becomes an inherent contradiction, and the same is true of the idea of revelation itself. Further, the kingdom of God cannot then possibly be the breakthrough of divine salvation into our world. It is not that revelation and belief can offer us a solution on the plane of our secular life, and thus in the sphere of philosophy, but certainly that in the last resort earthly problems must, as a result of secular thought itself, imply a surrender to the mystery.

Man can only assimilate this mystery in his life, whenever it is revealed to him in grace, because of the inner demand to surrender of mundane reality itself. If the fundamental *eidos* of religiousness rests in the personal community of man with his God, in the dialogue between God and man, then this dialogue becomes senseless unless it presupposes that, expressly or not, on the natural level the value of the human personality can be recognized as a being in but nevertheless not of this world. If this spontaneous and prereflective acknowledgment common to all men cannot be maintained on the critical plane of philosophic reflection, our faith is hampered in advance, and free, personally accepted belief becomes impossible and untenable before the bar of

human thought. The natural acceptance of the human attempt to grasp what is beyond ordinary earthly experience is the necessary presupposition both of revelation by grace and of our faithful acceptance of God's unconditional approach to us. In a pre-critical stage of belief and of the consciousness of mankind as a whole, the spontaneous prereflective acceptance of the constitutive attitude of a human being to the creative God is certainly sufficient, but in a more highly developed stage of human consciousness the personal and voluntary character of our religious life naturally demands critical recognition of the fact that the grace of God offered to us becomes inherently contradictory unless man has *not* already been compelled to surrender to the divine mystery as a result of his mundane outlook. Only if the natural affirmation of God in itself urges human beings to surrender to the divine mystery in a fashion which is either implicit and spontaneous or explicit and reflective can the phenomenon of religiousness be satisfactorily accepted as part of man's worldly life.

Indeed, when the Church puts forward its charismatic infallible doctrinal teaching in order to confirms[8] first of all the natural cognizability of God's existence, and, secondly, the natural cognizability of the personal value of the human being above and beyond this world—for which, in face of the reality of death, personal immortality is only another name[9] —then it does so not in a haughty attempt to conciliate a philosophy enmeshed in ignorance, but from a necessity which has its foundation in faith itself, and because in particular the natural cognition of these human values is of vital importance for the personal religious life itself. If faith itself did not demand it, such a pronouncement of its teaching authority would represent an illegitimate extension of its ecclesiastical authority to teach: a pronouncement concerning the things of this world which are of no saving significance to the life of faith.[10]

Within the one act of religious orientation towards the living God there is thus a theistic aspect which is cognizable by human means: the fact that on the basis of his existence in this world man raises the question of God's existence, and, indeed, does it in such a way that in the absence of this constitutive need for God the Christian religion itself would be hard pressed to maintain itself. Thus if our Christian religious orientation towards the living God involves an autonomous aspect which is not yet faith, but the natural basis for faith,

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[8] In the First Vatican Council. See *Acta et decreta sacrorum conciliorum recentiorum* (Collectio Lacensis, VII, 25o). See H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (ed. Adolf Schönmetzer). Freiburg, 1965[33], 3004 and 3026.

[9] In the Fifth Lateran Council (Mansi, XXXII, 842; Denzinger, 1440).

[10] We should note that a solemn and infallible truth declared by the Church is not necessarily a revealed truth. Based on the fact that the Church is guardian of revelation, the Church can also expound the natural truths of life which have an organic connection with the truth infallibly defined. The infallibility of the Church's decree does not in these cases change such teachings into revealed truth.

namely the relationship (whether expressly conscious or not) to the transcendental reality of God (which relationship God in his mercy accepts as the basis for religious intersubjectivity), then it is clear that thought on the basis of revelation is possible only if it includes secular thought: thought that proceeds from the immanence of this world to open up the approach towards the transcendental God, and thus naturally encourages the *surrender* of all human life to the divine mystery (irrespective of whether this mystery is then revealed, and if it is revealed how it is revealed). In this sense man is a being watching for a God who is on the way. In the absence of this personally established basis, which is only the breakthrough of God's creative act in our human experience, the *Pointe* of the Christian act of faith is blunted to pure fideism and the door is opened to religious romanticism.

Although the clarification of the natural theistic dimension in our Christian faith is one of the tasks of theology, and particularly so in a time of atheism and unbelief like our own, nevertheless its specific task is to concentrate scientific theological attention fully on the content of the specifically religious orientation towards God—namely, the "kerygma." This brings us to the second of our two conclusions.

In and through the grace of faith, or, to put it in high scholastic terms, in and through "the inner voice" of divine revelation, our religious acceptance reaches the living God in himself, but only to the extent that he is outlined in the gospel story and, ultimately, in the life of the Church. From this it follows that the explicit content of the inner evidence about himself given by God to the faithful, and to the community of the faithful, can be drawn only from saving history. If we then rightly maintain with St. Thomas the idea that the living God—*Deus sub ratione Deitatis*—is the proper subject of theology, because this is the way in which God is our salvation, then it becomes clear that we can reach the living God in theology only where he has revealed himself in this way; namely, in the story of the Old Testament, in the man Jesus, and in the whole mystery of the living Church—all this, of course, against the background of general human religious experience. Just as the philosopher cannot contemplate God except when proceeding from and remaining with and in the created world in which the divine mystery is cognizable, so theology can say nothing about the living God except when proceeding from and remaining with saving history in which God reveals himself as the God of our salvation. And yet the philosopher affirms God in his sovereign transcendence of worldly affairs as a supernatural being who is not a function of this world. In the same way the theologian affirms God in his transcendency—even in respect of saving history itself.

In this sense theology is concerned with the history of salvation on a christological basis, but in its profoundest intention it remains formally

theocentric, oriented towards (or rather, "tuned in to") the inner majesty of the living God. The more diligently theology investigates the temporal economy of salvation the deeper it can penetrate into the nature of God himself. The ultimate concern of theology is the comprehensibility of God himself as the God of our salvation, but the gospel story is the only avenue along which such an understanding can be attempted. Just as the creation aspect enters into the manner of our natural knowledge of God, so the historical and christological aspect enters into the way in which every theological judgment is formed.[11] The fundamental theological question—for example, in seeking what has been revealed in reference to creation and the *eschata*—*cannot* be resolved unless theology first seeks an answer to the question, How did God make it possible for Israel, as God's people, to experience the reality of creation and of the *eschata?* In what way did God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, allow his Son made man to experience these same realities? And finally, how does the Church, as the people of God redeemed in Jesus Christ, experience these saving realities? Or, to put it in a more general way, What does the old and the new Israel as the people of God think about itself and about God? This, it seems to me, is the fundamental question in any positive and speculative theological investigation. From this standpoint it is clear that theology is under a constant obligation to investigate how salvation was actually experienced by Israel, by Christ, and by his apostolic Church as it is expressed under divine guarantee in Holy Scripture. On this same basis it must investigate how this consciousness lives on, constantly clarifying itself, in the post-apostolic Church. The real life of man in its dialogue relationship with the God of our salvation is the treasure-mine and workshop of authentic and vital theology. In all this we must not forget that, although it was effected through the medium of the saving history of Israel and of the man Jesus, the divine call to salvation is addressed to all men, including those men who are now living. Contemporary mankind hears the word of God here and now and must actualize it in its life. Therefore this divine call must constantly be brought into relationship with its particular spiritual situation. Thanks to what Bultmann rightly calls a certain *Vorverständnis,* or pre-understanding, each epoch of human history is granted its own specifically coloured view of the significance of divine revelation particularly adjusted to its own time.

Perhaps the most sensitive point of this theological knowledge of God, which seeks to become a *theologia* by way of the *oikonomia,* lies ultimately in its recognition that the living God is totally different from the reality it knows in the history of salvation. But even this conscious ignorance is nonetheless a truthful, indeed, a life-giving, piece of religious knowledge because it is

[11] Cf. Thomas: "utimur in (sacra) doctrina … effectu naturae vel gratiae, loco definitionis (Dei)." *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 7 ad 1.

embedded in a positive knowledge of the history in which God is *personally* and effectively present. Thus the incarnation of the Son in its Old Testament pre-history, in its historic fulfillment, and in its ecclesial form as a mystery is the specific *locus theologicus* which allows us to reach out hopefully towards the intertrinitarian divine mystery that has given itself as the content of all our lives.

Chapter 3

THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF FAITH IN 1983

Parting words

On taking official leave of this university [Catholic University Nijmegen] and my much beloved faculty of theology (students and lecturers) today, when I speak about contemporary theological interpretation of faith I am aware of the distinction between '*believing* in the year 1983' – including the manifold, even polarised forms of religious interpretation in our churches − on the one hand, and on the other the present-day *theological* understanding of faith, which likewise assumes manifold forms. After all, theologising or theological interpretation of faith is a secondary reflexive enterprise concerned with what is happening, being experienced and thought in Christian religious communities here and now. But theological reflection can also anticipate and pave the way for *future* proclamation by churches as 'God's communities', for the simple reason that theology not only studies the current, ever limited present, but also the full spectrum of the Christian religious tradition as a whole and its Christian experience in all manner of socio-cultural contexts. Indeed, Karl Barth considered the primary task of theology to be paving the way for the church's future proclamation. As a theologian I want to highlight the biblically nourished 'religious instinct' (to use a Thomist term) of Christian religious communities. Secondly, as a Christian theologian, I shall reflect thematically and critically on it in terms of the broader, overall traditions of both Judaism and Christianity.

In parting I simply want to tell you how I personally theologise – that is, practise theology as one among many theologians. By this I do not mean anecdotal stories, nor intensely personal, autobiographical confessions (there I have to disappoint you; indeed, that would be counter to what you have come to expect of me – however charming such an approach may be, both from my own point of view and yours). I propose analysing *the structure of that theology,* admittedly on the basis of tacit autobiographic experience throughout life's ups and downs, and shall do so soberly in a somewhat detached manner. This

inevitably entails some objectification. But through such reflexive objectification my personal experience becomes more communicable, apart from the profit that others may derive from it for their own theologising. At least, I hope so.

To the point

Ever since the work of Spinoza (1632-1677) and Richard Simon (1638-1712) the distinction between *hermeneutica sacra* and *hermeneutica profana*, that is between exegesis of profane texts and of canonical religious texts (in our case the Bible), has been radically watered down. That history,[1] of which Hans Frei of Yale University provides a masterly analysis, raises the question whether this historical gain does not require some correction. To be sure, at an interpretive level there is no difference between so-called profane and sacred hermeneutics, but when it comes to interpreting its 'object' there is definitely a peculiarly 'Christian hermeneutics', an exegetical craft and art.

I want to show that a hermeneutic or actualising theology, if it wants to remain true to the canonical substance of the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, confessed as the Christ and the son of God, cannot avoid at least three problem areas. First I locate the three areas, then I analyse them one by one, albeit within the time constraints of a farewell ceremony. Personally I see this synopsis as a preliminary rather than a concluding insight.

First problem area

Theology is about God, who is involved with humans living in the world of nature, culture and history. As *Christian* theology it is about God as he has been and is explained to us by synagogues and churches in the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition – albeit in so-called profane history, which, by virtue of God's acts of creation and salvation, has inherent *theological* significance that has not merely been ascribed to it by churches and synagogues.

For this reason Christian theology fundamentally concerns what I shall provisionally, without further specification, call 'two poles': tradition and situation. Because of this polarity between old and new, theology is essentially a *hermeneutic process* of actualising the religious substance of both the Torah and the Gospels as we know them.

Second problem area

When asked what hermeneutic theologising actually entails, however, theologians usually respond: '*What* is theology?' Yet their first comment could

[1] H. Frei, *The eclipse of biblical narrative. A study in eighteenth and nineteenth century hermeneutics*, Newhaven, London, 1974.

equally well have been: '*Who* is the theologian?' Who is the person doing theology? For all talk is part of a social system; besides, language is not just a part but a constitutive ingredient of every social subsystem. Hence talking in itself is a social act. For theology it implies that the theological subject is also a social actor. In their thematic and critical reflection all theologians are engaged, wittingly or unwittingly, in socio-political activity. Hence the salient question is: what is the position of the theologising subject – its position in society, in the university, the churches or Christian grassroots communities in everyday life? The concrete reality of theologising subjects – who are, moreover, male or female – colours their theology. The plurality of theological insights, besides other internal causes and interpretive problems, often stems from the theologians' own diverse positions or social situations. In this regard the disparity between various forms of liberation theology in Latin America and dominant forms of Euro-American theology comes to mind.

After all, theologians themselves are socialised in thoroughly concrete, objective societal forms and have internalised these plausibility structures. They are socialised in a particular (e.g. Western academic) tradition that predisposes them to certain prescribed methods and scientific attitudes. In addition theologians are inculturated in a particular extensive or confined regional culture. Consequently, if they want to avoid theologising ideologically, their theological reflection must take account, critically and analytically, of the objective societal form and existential pattern in which they actually live, their scientific academic tradition and the existing power structures in the church and society to which they belong.

This is all the more important for real-life people here and now, because that concrete culture is *what* their Christian faith is modelled on, the medium *through which* they assimilate it, and finally, the setting *in which* their faith is actually lived. The socio-cultural transmission and embedment of religion mean that fundamental changes in the socio-cultural pattern and experiential and thought categories make it difficult for Christians to deal with the concrete form of their faith, which therefore has to be doctored if contemporary believers are still to recognise it as peculiarly Christian. That being the case, a historical break with the cultural forms of that religion could be the only possible way to maintain Christian continuity and identity, the sole adapted version of evangelically accurate, actualised theology of the Christian religious tradition.

We conclude, then, that theology as a hermeneutic enterprise must be essentially critical of ideology, and try to avoid it or dispose of it.

Third problem area

Finally, the hermeneutic problem in theology when it adopts an ideologically critical stance raises the question of the dialectical relation between theological

theory and praxis. Jesus' message about God's kingdom is so integrated with his interaction with people in both word and deed that his preaching and existential praxis interpret each other and at the same time change the given situation. Jesus' openness to the rich tax collector, no less than to vulnerable children, the sick and the mentally afflicted, cripples and paupers, concretely demonstrates what he is speaking about, and in that way anticipates eschatological salvation in the here and now. Jesus proclaims and affirms God's reality as salvation for all, but he does so in and through living his human life as communicative, liberating praxis. Put differently: through his human actions he affirms God's redemptive reality. Hence while *what* is actualised merits great emphasis in theology, it becomes a living revelation only in present-day religious interpretation and corresponding praxis. We cannot 'passively' receive our faith from others.

Because of time constraints I can only give a broad outline of a few points in the three problem areas.

1. THE 'TWIN POLES': TRADITION AND SITUATION

1.1 Definition of tradition and situation

1.1.1 Religious tradition that both reveals meaning and liberates people

In the Judaic and Christian revelational, religious, experiential and exegetic tradition (hereafter simply 'tradition') two inseparable facets are distinguishable. In the first place the Christian tradition (in essence the gospel) imparts *meaning.* Indeed, all the great classical traditions of humankind, especially religious ones, have the power to disclose meaning: through all historical ups and downs their history is a cumulative disclosure of truth and meaning. That is how they understand themselves. (I do not dwell on differently focused critical questions raised by fundamental theology – so-called *Grundlagenkritik*.) Besides, the great traditions present truth and meaning as an authentically human existential possibility that can be actualised as a living reality even in the altered state of the world and the church of our time. *Religious tradition opens up a horizon of possible experience also for modern people. This is not primarily a disclosure of theoretical meaning, but in the first place a narrative revelation of meaning that is nonetheless consistently accompanied, even in the Old and the New Testament, by at least preparatory theological reflection. Narratology, the science of narration, has disclosed its structures in broad outline.*[2]

[2] See e.g. Cl. Bremond, *Logique du récit*, Paris, 1973; R.E. Scholes & R. Kellogg, *The nature of narrative*, New York, Oxford, 1966; W. Kort, *Narrative elements and religious meanings,* Philadelphia, 1975; F. Kermode, *The sense of an ending: studies in the theory of fiction,* London, 1967; R. MacAfee Brown, 'My story and 'the story', in: *Theology Today* 32 (1975-1976), 166-173; U. Simon, *Story and faith in the biblical narrative*, London, 1975; H. Jones, 'The concept of story and theological discourse' in:

Ancient, later and the latest (human science) hermeneutics has explored this facet of human traditions as narrative traditions of meaning. Rightly so, but they have not directly confronted the second facet of tradition (and may even have neglected it), which is the following.

In the second place religious traditions are fraught with religious meaning *that possesses transformative, innovative, liberating, ultimately redemptive power*. As such tradition also summons its adherents to a clearly defined, practical way of life. Whatever the distinctive essence of what is called liberation in the various great human traditions and whatever it entails, these traditions promise people salvation and liberation through their disclosure of meaning: the *truth* of what human life is about. Ultimately it is the convergence of two narratives: that of the evangelical-religious tradition and our individual and collective life story.[3]

The distinctive characteristic of Christian liberation is illustrated by an example from Jesus' ministry. Confronted with little Zaccheus, who had climbed a tree in order to see Jesus passing by, Jesus does not say, 'God loves you' (as modern fundamentalist posters screech at us in the hubbub of our railway stations). No, what happens is something else: Jesus comes into his home and his behaviour and dealings with his fellow man demonstrate to Zaccheus the *truth* of God's love for Zaccheus. Something transcending purely human experience is disclosed. Zaccheus abandons his erring way of life and gives half his fortune to the poor. And because Jesus, as a result of his experience of God, maintains his relationship with fellow humans radically and uncompromisingly, he wittingly goes to his death at the hands of his fellow humans and accepts it as the supreme price for, and consequence of, the truth of his message and corresponding conduct.

On the basis of these two facets – a religious tradition that both discloses meaning and liberates people (and, more generally, because human history is not just a story but also praxis) − theology is an enterprise which is partly *hermeneutic* and partly, in its very theory, *involves a certain praxis* of redemption and liberation. Hence theology is not to be reduced to purely theoretical interpretation of Christian history. There is a dialectical relation between past, present and to be accomplished future. The relation to praxis – let's call it orthopraxis for now – is essential for theological theory per se.

Scottish Journal of Theology 29 (1976), 415-433; H. Rikhof, 'Narrative theology', in: *The concept of the church*, London, 1981, 129-148; S. Crites, 'The narrative quality of the experience', in: *JAAR* 39 (1971), 290-307; P. Ricoeur, 'The narrative function', in: *Semeia* 13 (1973), 177-202 and 'L'histoire comme récit et comme pratique', in: *Esprit* 6 (1981), 155-164; J.-B. Metz, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft,* Mainz, 1977, 181-203. General overviews, in: *Semeia* 16 (1976), 5; G. Stroup, 'A bibliographical critique', in: *Theology Today* 32 (1975), 133-143; B. Wacker, *Narrative Theologie*, München, 1977.

[3] See R. MacAfee, l.c., 170-171; also D. Tracy, *The analogical imagination*, New York, 1981, and: *Blessed rage for order*, New York, 1975.

1.1.2 'Situation' in a profane cultural and a specifically Christian sense

1.1.2.1 In contradistinction to tradition I consider situation, in a profane sense, to be the socio-cultural and existential context of people to whom the gospel is proclaimed here and now. It is the real-life situation in which Christians hand down their religious tradition to new generations: contemporary people living in modern culture, whether in Euro-American welfare societies, in non-Western cultures (those in touch with technocratic civilisation and those in the Third World), or those known as *le troisième homme*, that is Westerners totally cut off from their Judaic and Christian roots. Seen thus, 'situation' is by no means a uniform concept but comprehends diverse realities, each requiring appropriate analysis. It is a complex totality of analysable, unforeseen and never altogether foreseeable contingencies. *No theory* can encompass 'the situation' in its entirety.

1.1.2.2 More specifically I regard situation as the present-day *Christian* situation: the current context which offers an answer, or various answers, to the question of how Christians, qua Christians, are in fact situated in this secular modern culture and society and how they deal with its intellectual and experiential categories – conformist fashion? legitimatising them? critically? Or rejecting them out of hand? In other words, what is their religious praxis and actual understanding of faith here and now? In effect the question concerns the way they live *in sequela Jesu,* either following him or deviating from his way. Their identity with (or deviation from) Christian religious tradition manifests itself *in* believers' real-life conduct. Theologians then proceed to reflect on it. In this sense the situation itself is part of Christian tradition, either orthodox or deviant.

1.1.2.3 It follows that the subject of religious hermeneutics is not the theologian but Christian religious communities: the church in its broadest manifestation. Theologians do fulfil a function in that phenomenon – a reflexive, thematically hermeneutic and critical function. In exceptional cases, however, theological theory is ahead of believers' actual conduct. This patently raises the question of the dialectical relation between theory and praxis as an essential problem of hermeneutic theology. (I am speaking only of the theologian's task, not that of the church's doctrinal authority.)

1.1.2.4 Historically the Christian tradition is only one tradition in the panorama of living religions, alongside Judaism and many other world religions and new religious movements. Hence, while remaining true to its self-understanding, our present-day religious interpretation should enter into dialogue with other religious movements and religions, particularly in order to enrich our self-understanding. Such critical dialogue is an essential part of hermeneutic theology, especially in countries like Belgium and France where Islam is the

second largest religion after Catholicism, when dialogue also becomes a challenge to neighbourliness and concrete love of one's fellow beings.

1.2 Dialectic relation between tradition and situation

1.2.1 Interrelationship between past and present as an encounter between different cultural forms of Christian religious understanding

This process of interrelating tradition and situation can be called a 'correlation method', although the term strikes me as ambiguous: by 'correlation' I simply mean interrelationship in a very general sense. The word permits various possible meanings, ranging from similarity and correlation to conflict and confrontation – in short, the whole broad spectrum between identity (clicking) and non-identity (clashing).

Here we are up against an extremely delicate problem. On the one hand the fundamental tenor and power of the gospel are transcendent and universal, and in that sense trans-cultural, that is not tied to any one culture. On the other hand this very universal, trans-cultural gospel that challenges all humans is only to be found in the form of particular cultures (Judaic, Judaeo-Hellenistic and late antiquity, Carolingian, Celtic, Roman, African, Asian, etc.), never above or beyond these, never in distilled religious substance. Thus there is a perennial dialectics between the universality of the gospel, which challenges every culture critically and transcends it, and its concrete manifestation in particular cultures. Only *in* concrete particularity can the gospel reveal the universality of salvation coming from God. In that sense biblical and official ecclesiastic religious statements are equally contextual, local and particular, while still actively conveying a universal message. Thus there is an enduring religious substance that is always actualised in and acclimatised to particular cultures, whereas it is not accessible to us a-historically or supra-culturally. It is a *historical identity* of that which is rooted *in* the evanescent reality that eludes its contingency. That is the very core of theological hermeneutics.

Thinking on these lines one perceives the real hermeneutic problem as one of encounter between diverse Christian cultures. Besides, the present-day situation is not merely the *channel* for the transmitted religious current. The secular situation itself has *theological relevance,* for according to our interpretation all history falls under God's scheme of liberation and redemption. What is at issue is not the application of a normative biblical and ecclesiastic tradition to a 'theology-free' situation, but rather an encounter between different cultural embodiments of the same religious understanding with its corresponding existential praxis: that of the Bible, along with all subsequent forms of Christian religious interpretation in diverse cultural eras and cultures. What is at issue is a critical encounter, both theoretical and practical, between different cultural embodiments of Christian religious

understanding, which enables us to conceive of a substance of faith that can never be encountered in isolation. Hence the interrelationship of the 'twin poles' does not imply a self-evident correlation, not even in the sense that the one pole (Christian tradition) is considered the sole source, whereas the other pole (the present situation) is not treated as a source at all but only as, for example, the area to be irrigated. *In* Christian tradition the erstwhile situation has already been taken into account, and *in* our present situation God is no less creatively and liberatingly active than he was then. Hence if one can speak of twin poles at all, they lie in *bygone* cultural forms as well as in *contemporary* cultural embodiments of *the same religious substance,* which is the actual source of both past and present-day cultural forms and expressions of faith. In a manner of speaking correlation is a metaphoric, even a misleading term. We should rather speak of an encounter of cultures living by the substance of the Christian faith and 'acclimatising' it to their own cultural reality.[4] That seems to be the only way of avoiding two to my mind illegitimate extremes: on the one hand a kind of positivist notion of revelation (or rather tradition), in which only one pole is normative – the vertical imperative of what is known as God's word in Scripture – and on the other the 19th century liberal model, in which 'modernity' in fact becomes the norm determining present-day religious interpretation, thus declaring just one cultural form (the modern one) absolute. Because of the trans-cultural character of the universal gospel (albeit manifested only *in* particular cultural forms) the cultural forms of no given period – neither the biblical era nor that of ecclesiastic segments of the church's living tradition – can ever be absolute.

But that does not mean that the historical, socio-cultural vehicles of tradition must necessarily be denigrated. On the contrary, as the only possible vehicles of the manifested substance of faith they have a *positive function* for the very reason that the transcultural component of the gospel is only to be found *in* the particularity of cultural hermeneutic structures. Those who denigrate historical transmission in all its relative particularisations – that is, relate them exclusively to the situation at that time – rob Jesus' history of its significance for our present-day history. It is *in* historical transmission that the *Christian constants* emerge,[5] not as it were 'abstracted *from*' concrete history.[6] Just as one

[4] In Chicago's Theological Union Robert Schreiter is researching the cross-cultural problem of encounter between different religions and cultures. See e.g. 'Issues facing contextual theologies today', in: *Verbum* (SVD) 1980, 267-277. See C. Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures*, New York, 1973; L. Luzbetak, *The church and cultures*, Divine Word Publications, 1963, and: 'Signs of progress in contextual theology', in: *Verbum* (SVD) 1 (1981), 39-57; D. Von Allmen, 'The birth of theology. Contextualisation as the dynamic element in the formulation of the New Testament theology', in: *International Review of Mission* 64 (1975), 38-52; E. Leach, *Culture and communication*, Cambridge, 1976.

[5] See E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, London/New York, 1980, part III, 629-645.

[6] In a review of the preceding book (n. 5) Leo Bakker rightly formulated my exact meaning more

can compare biblical theology in Christian history with that of Augustine, and Augustine's (and the Bible's) with, say, that of Athanasius, Thomas Aquinas or Bonaventure, and these (and the Bible's) with that of Luther, Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg or Karl Rahner, so contemporary hermeneutic theologians compare the 'present Christian situation' with forms of theology and Christian praxis in the Bible, in patristics, in the Middle Ages, in modernity, et cetera.

Hence belief in God's revelation always has its point of departure in our world of today: *there are historical vehicles.* Revelation is transmitted in various places and eras but still takes on the features of the religious interpretation advanced in each instance. Thus every conceivable religious interpretation is based on and couched in the medium of people's understanding of the world, which is peculiar to their culture. That understanding is historical and culture specific; it is but one culturally determined, particular understanding of the world (despite a universally human, even logical basic structure). Hence the hermeneutic problem of Christian identity throughout the ages can be solved only by comparing the various cultural forms of religious experience and religious interpretation, in which the substance of the gospel is articulated in diverse ways. The only difference between Christian tradition in the past and the new tradition we are shaping today is that our comparisons of past interpretations are *post factum*: history has already weathered the dangers of actualising theology; that still lies ahead for us, who are in the midst of the actualising process with all its dangers of success and failure, conjecture and error – of orthodoxy and 'heresy'.

1.2.2 Two poles, one source

So when we speak of two poles and one source we need to differentiate this elliptic expression precisely. In discussing my theological hermeneutics Hans Küng does not refer to two sources or poles. Instead he recognises a single source (the Bible and Christian tradition) on the one hand; on the other he does not regard the situation as a source but calls it a pole and a horizon.[7] But that entails a risk of creating a *theology-free* zone: the situation. For my part, on closer scrutiny I would identify the 'two poles' as, firstly, the substance of faith embedded in the Jewish and Judaeo-Hellenistic culture of the Bible (and in the various cultures of the church's tradition in the past), and secondly, that same substance that we need to apply to our contemporary situation, hence a contemporary piece of 'Christian tradition'. Thus the question could read: how do we bridge the divide between the old religious tradition and our new

precisely than I did, thus preventing misinterpretation of these pages. See 'Gerechtigheid en liefde', in: *Bijdragen* 39 (1978), (70-77) 75.

[7] H. Küng, E. Schillebeeckx et al., *Consensus in theology? A dialogue with H. Küng and E. Schillebeeckx*, Philadelphia, 1980, (1-17) especially 16-17.

situations?[8] After all, nowadays the Christian message is no longer proclaimed to the people of Corinth, Ephesus or Thessalonica, but to present-day people with their own understanding of themselves and the world, living in a modern socio-economic order with its own political dispensations. Actualised faith and – at the level of thematic, critical reflection – actualised theology in effect mean *representing* the Christian religious and experiential tradition intelligibly and vibrantly in other, historically altered situations and other experiential and thought categories, That requires critically yet continuously relating past Christian tradition and our contemporary socio-historical and existential situation to the concrete praxis of present-day Christians, in such a way that the actualisation does not impair the liberating disclosure of the truth of the Gospel tradition – in other words, whilst preserving orthodoxy.

As a result authentic theologising proceeds in two phases, which together constitute a dialectic whole. *Firstly,* every theological proposition must be justifiable in terms of the theologian's religious tradition. That implies that all theologians are engaged in *interpretation.* Theology is a *hermeneutic enterprise.* It means that theologians use manifold and divergent interpretive methods derived mainly from the literary sciences (e.g. historical literary criticism, structuralism and semiotics, so-called materialistic exegesis, etc.). They also have to explicate and justify their chosen method. After all, every method has a 'philosophy' of its own and is not 'innocent'; each has a highly focused intention. Finally, they have to devise criteria according to which interpretations of the Christian tradition can be publicly and critically evaluated. Orthodoxy needs a coherent set of criteria.

Secondly: every theological proposition also has to be justified in terms of an analysis and interpretation of the 'current situation'. Otherwise one creates a short circuit between past and present experiential and thought categories.

Yet together the two steps constitute a dialectic whole. After all, we can only interpret the Christian tradition in terms of questions arising from our real-life situation. Understanding the past in itself presupposes interpretation of the present. Conversely, our understanding of the present is partly determined by the historical influence of the Christian tradition.

The theologian's constant two-way scrutiny means that the theological hermeneutic process consists in 'relating' the (exegetic and historical) interpretation of religious tradition to an interpretation of the critically analysed present situation, in both a profane cultural and a specifically Christian sense. Even a positivist-style theological interpretation, where one

[8] The reciprocal critical 'interrelationship' between religious documents from the past and the present situation requires prior structuralist or semiotic work, namely (a) a theory explaining how meaning is produced; and (b) structuraly analyses differentiating betweeen possible meanings of a text and impossible ones. But understanding a text cannot be reduced to an exposition of the text.

pole (the Christian religious tradition that propounds revelation) conflicts with the second pole (the current situation), still correlates tradition with the situation here and now, even if only by categorically rejecting 'modernity'. If that rejection is to be critically substantiated, the modern situation in which we live has to be analysed and interpreted. Hence whether positive or negative, for theology interpretation entails analytical involvement, not only with the Christian past but also with the present situation. In that situational analysis the theologian is dependent, albeit critically, on the human and social sciences and their scientific models. Only after such interdisciplinary exploration of the field on which the believer wishes to comment 'theologically' can an autonomous theological discourse get under way, primarily and especially in response to the question why we aver that the situation has a 'religious' dimension and hence is open to theological discussion.

Interconfessionally this could lead to differences. Because of the fundamental prominence of the Christian belief in creation Catholic theologians in particular will confess both the world and history in every affirmation of God, despite the ambivalence and sinfulness of that history. In Catholic tradition trust in humankind and its history leads to the affirmation that, regardless of all ambiguities, the present situation remains an authentic *locus theologicus* or location where theological reflection finds its data in light of the Christian tradition. Protestant Christian theologians, by contrast, would be more inclined to accentuate the brokenness of our situation; they will concentrate on 'the demonic' (itself a 'religious' category) in our situation, hence will usually produce negative correlations between religious tradition and present situation. Both approaches entail a risk, the former of underplaying the senseless aspects of history (and of the massive tradition of the churches) and the autonomous rationality of the socio-economic order, and the latter by overlooking God's ongoing liberation history in and through human deeds ever since the creation.

1.2.3 Analogia fidei

I have said that cultural historical forms are constitutive vehicles of transmissions expounding the message of revelation. God and his revelation in Jesus occur *independently* of humans and their history, which is nonetheless experienced and discussed by people in the form of a religious experiential and interpretive tradition. Being experienced and discussed by humans stamps revelation as history, hence as *dependent* on the place and era of the discussion. Thus experiencing and understanding revelation becomes a constitutive part of the revelational process. That makes revelation communicable, for the first disciples' individual and collective religious experience of eternal salvation in Jesus could be communicated to their contemporaries and subsequent

generations in that they could describe their experience by means of a shared (semiotic) communication system – initially the Judaic worldview, then the Hellenistic one, et cetera. In each instance we have a culture specific appropriation of the gospel message, a contact between the gospel and the varying, culturally marked interpretation of believers in a particular cultural era. Since each used a different semiotic communication system we have a whole history of socio-cultural, socio-historical transmissions. In our conception of hermeneutic theology the singularity of these historical transmissions, then and now, will play a greater role than before.

This permits some preliminary conclusions. For it shows that *to us* the evangelical identity of meaning does not lie at the level of the Bible and past religious tradition *as such*, hence is not to be found in a material replication of the past (possibly with nostalgic tendencies); but neither does it lie at the level of the situation, then and now, *as such* (whether in a biblicist or modernistic sense). That identity is only to be found at the level of a *corresponding relation between the original message* (tradition) and the constantly changing *situation*, then and now. That is the meaning of what is usually called the *analogia fidei*. In that case the fundamental identity of meaning between successive eras in Christian interpretation of tradition does not refer to corresponding *terms,* for instance between the biblical situation and ours (which would permit us to invoke Jesus' cleansing of the temple as a direct biblical justification for an Amsterdam squat), but to corresponding *relations* between such terms (message and situation then and now). Hence fundamental unity and equality do not pertain to the *terms* of the hermeneutic equation, but to the *relations* between them. I could illustrate it as follows:

the given articulation or relation between:

$$\frac{\text{Jesus' message}}{\text{Jesus' socio-historical context}} = \frac{\text{New Testament message}}{\text{New Testament socio-historical context}}$$

is reproduced in the relation between

$$\frac{\text{Patristic religious interpretation}}{\text{Socio-cultural context then}} = \frac{\text{Medieval religious interpretation}}{\text{Socio-cultural context then}}$$

And finally, the reproduced relation has to be *reproduced yet again* in the relation or articulation between −

Current religious interpretation (1983)

———————————

Our socio-cultural context (1983)

Christian identity of meaning resides in an equal relation between these articulations. Such equal relations throughout Christian tradition is a norm, an orientation and an inspiration, the cardinal model for present-day evangelically faithful expression of the contemporary meaning of the Christian message. So we never confront the Christian identity of meaning directly; besides, it can never be pinned down once and for ever. But that does not make it arbitrary. Christian identity, that which is one and the same, is not a matter of *equality* but of *proportional equality.* The diverse interpretations of the same religious substance by various historical vehicles of cultural transmission are not contradictory, but neither can they be harmonised on a single, level plane. Hence what is known as the evolution of dogma cannot be understood as it was understood in the scholastic or neo-scholastic era, nor even the way Newman understood it – as an ever expanding explication of what was implicitly given in the Bible and passed on more or less consistently to this day. For even though the substance of the faith was given at the outset, it was given *in* a contingent, particular form, even in the Bible. Historical twists in people's cultural understanding of the world preclude a purely explicatory process. What we in fact have is something quite different. It is rather a process of constantly new 'inculturations' of the trans-cultural substance of the gospel, which itself was not given or received in anything but a culturally specific form. Consequently dogmas and creeds are in one sense irreversible. They cannot be abolished: they have always actively expressed and safeguarded the mystery of God and Jesus Christ within a particular socio-cultural system of reference in a manner that was more or less effective for that day and age. On the other hand that historical cultural form can become thoroughly irrelevant for later generations, who may express the same substance no less accurately in the semantic structures of their particular culture. Yet even irrelevant dogmas remain theologically important. After all, proportionally our modern understanding of the faith must accomplish the same as the first Judaic interpretation of Jesus and, for example, subsequent Hellenistic interpretations and that of the Council of Chalcedon. What is at stake is Christian identity *in* cultural twists or changes, not an identity that used to be called, purely intellectualistically, 'homogeneous continuity' (which in any case is not historically demonstrable).

That is why theologians have to analyse the fundamental hermeneutic structures in which Jesus, the God-sent saviour, was always and is still being interpreted, anew in each instance: in Judaic culture, Hellenistic culture, the Middle Ages, modernity... in Asia and in Africa. Only thus can they discern the equality of corresponding relations, or where the equality was or is being disrupted.

To the church, therefore, cultural revolutions are always times of tribulation, crisis and uncertainty; they are inherent in the Christian faith in its historical manifestation. Christian *awareness of meaning* is always achieved in creative *attribution of meaning* or in producing new meaning or 're-reading' the religious tradition in terms of a new situation: creatively recalling the Jewish and Christian history of revelation, experience and exegesis, culminating in a productive new reading, interpretation and praxis here and now. Interpretation *creates* new tradition, handing down a living religious tradition to future generations with creative piety. Christian identity – the common Christian elements in the transmission of such diverse cultural worlds as those of Jesus, Paul, Augustine, pope Gregory, Thomas**,** Bonaventure, Bellarmine, Luther or Calvin, Teresa of Avila and someone like bishop Romero – consists in the same fundamental view of God and humankind and their interrelationship, albeit a perception manifesting itself in different cultural-historical, geographical, psychological and sociological forms, but in such a manner that, within these (possibly distorting) boundaries, the divisions were and are nonetheless obliterated and transcended in a specifically Christian way. This search for proportional equality results in actualised good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the here and now.

So much for the hermeneutic character of theology. I conclude with some comments on the ideologically critical intention of this hermeneutic approach.

2. CRITICISM OF IDEOLOGY IN HERMENEUTIC THEOLOGY

Especially since the 1960s, partly as a result of the polemics between H.-G. Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas, many theologians have come to realise that a purely theoretical hermeneutic theology may well lead to false actualisation or at any rate forfeit its contextual plausibility. Such an approach overlooks the fact that both the Christian tradition **(**in its massive form, as we have inherited it) and our present-day situation can harbour ideological elements.

By ideology I mean, in the first place, something positive that can, however, eventually display pathological features. Hence I consider the negative, unfavourable meaning of ideology a derivative: a pathology of something good. In the positive sense I see ideology as a totality of images, representations and symbols created by a society to account for its identity. It reproduces and confirms that identity by means of 'foundational symbols'

(symbolic universe of meaning). But this ideological function of identification and conservation can assume pathological forms and turn into diverse kinds of negative ideology, variously analysed by Karl Marx, Nietzsche and Freud and many after them. Such ideology functions pathologically, especially inasmuch as the legitimisation is distorted, manipulated and monopolised by dominant social groups. That makes it a means of maintaining dominant interests and reflects a false group consciousness. But because the group cannot project a false view of itself unless it was first constituted at a symbolical level, this unfavourable meaning of ideology is not original. *Because* every society is symbolically structured the symbols can also become false and pathological. Here, however, I understand ideology in this second, derivative sense.

Hence by ideologically critical hermeneutics or interpretation purged of ideology I mean exposure of the naïve conception that being and language (i.e. thought and speech), despite all classically recognised conceptual inadequacies, are still supposed to always refer to essentially the same reality. After all, if one recognises that thought and speech are co-determined by all kinds of interests, one will not have such a naïve notion of 'conceptually theoretical' knowledge. Concepts and theories are often used to systematically legitimatise and safeguard the societal status quo and positions of power. So if Christian theologians seek to be true to the binding core of biblical and ecclesiastic pronouncements in their authentically evangelical scope, they have to conclude that ideologically critical analysis is an essential element of hermeneutic theology if it is to accord with God's word. The history of theology, too, often reflects a history of victors and powers, who marginalised evangelically feasible alternatives or even silenced them as vanquished in that era – albeit only temporarily: forgotten truths have a way of resurfacing once more.

Undoubtedly there have always been those who maintained that in actual fact the history of victors is still the outcome of the salvific activity of God's Spirit in church leadership, hence that there are no evangelically legitimate alternatives. No Christian will deny that the grace or action of the Holy Spirit – the very soul of the church as a religious community – continually transcends its historical manifestations and is only to be found *in* particular ecclesiastic forms, never beyond or above them. But such concrete historical embodiments record not only the church's fortunate responses to grace, but also its less satisfactory, even ideological responses to the proffered grace. While the New Testament tells us that God's Spirit guides his church and keeps it on track throughout history, this promise is not a guarantee of or alibi for the evangelical accuracy of church leaders' every decision at every given point in time. Alongside a list of historically sound decisions one could also produce a so-called ideologically critical *Denzinger*, comprising less sound and, from the

point of view of the gospel, unfortunate ecclesiastic decisions. Besides, the Roman Catholic Church has always rightly opposed sectarian claims that the religious community is exclusively 'a church of the orthodox', a 'holy remnant'. But the same applies to its pastoral, doctrinal and disciplinary authoritative bodies. What they call infallible dogmas are no more than rare, sporadic 'road signs' on the church's course through history, often no more than course corrections in its various movements. Although I roundly condemn any high-handed, triumphalist criticism of the church, it does not alter the fact that Christian theologians, mindful of their own situation, may not withhold their ideologically critical findings from the church. A church that does not permit, or at any rate tolerate, this shows itself to be weak and unsure of the power of the defenceless gospel. It is a kind of lack of faith.

Unless purged of ideology any theoretical hermeneutic theology could head off in two directions, missing the real objective.

On the one hand such theologians may, through a fallacious *aggiornamento,* adapt the Christian tradition to the modern age, for instance to our privatised Western society with its focus on the a-political individual, its technocracy, consumerism and faith in progress. That would rob the Christian faith of its power to liberate people from enslaving elements in modern societies. They would adapt the faith to critically unanalysed experiential and thought categories regarding 'modern humans'.

On the other hand such theologians also fail to do justice to past tradition. For that, too, does not come to us in purely evangelical forms, but is expressed in the experiential and thought categories of many cultures and cultural eras that also call for ideologically critical study. This entails a danger of presenting, in the guise of the gospel or church tradition, outdated, ideologically loaded concepts as normative for Christian and theological thought, thereby wrongfully curtailing Christians' evangelical freedom.

However, acknowledging that ideological criticism is essential for hermeneutic theology does not tell us anything about the nature of a relatively sound method of exercising that criticism. After all, every method has its own philosophy, which can in its turn be subjected to criticism. Some forms of ideological criticism are anti-empirical and purely theoretical; there are also empirical studies that dispense with theory altogether. Thus theologians can no more operate with 'critical theories' that have not been tested empirically than with a pile of empirical sociological data unsupported by meticulous theorising. Either way such theologians are prone to theoretical – in the second case to positivist – dogmatism.

Apart from the specific ideologically critical method, serious critical historical analysis of the socio-economic contexts of ecclesiastic pronouncements often show that, for instance, a materially identical statement,

if constantly repeated through the ages, nonetheless covers a diversity of totally disparate statements and meanings whilst still insisting that 'the church has always taught…'. This is the source of the tragedy of people like Mgr Lefebvre, for the teachings of Vatican II on certain issues (e.g. freedom of religion and conscience) were often taught differently or even contradicted by the church in the past. So continuity may also be pseudo-continuity. A certain 'discontinuity' like that effected by Vatican II may well spell the retrieval of underlying trends of the gospel.

So *ratio theologica* or theological reason**,** which has featured fairly prominently in theology through the ages, is not the same as the so-called unbiased 'theoretical reason' of the Enlightenment, or Kantian purely practical reason, or Hegel's personified reason. All it entails is theoretical reason, which itself has dimensions transcending reason, and which, prompted by the enslaving memories of human suffering, become *practical* in the sense of liberating. As *theological* reason it is grounded in faithful remembrance of Christian experiential tradition: an anamnesis, believing in *the promise of God's word* that, in view of the many instances of folly, inspires us to act in liberating ways at every level of human life; an anamnesis also of *the contradiction of God's word* that critically examines current conflicts in the church, the world and our own hearts and likewise inspires liberating action. Criticism of ideology and the prohibition of idolatry are intrinsic to Judaeo-Christian religious tradition. They stem from the Mosaic opposition to the golden calf, the classical prophetic, apocalyptic legacy of Judaism and Christianity, especially from Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God to all people (and consequently primarily to the poor, those that mourn and sufferers), as well as from corresponding existential praxis; and finally, from the historical significance of his death as the faithful accomplishment of his own message and life and, following from that, from anticipatory reinstatement of that tragic history thanks to Jesus' resurrection: God's ultimate acceptance of human beings, even in their imperfection and helplessness. Over against a logos tradition accessible to the hermeneutic quest for meaning, the Judaeo-Christian heritage also has an anti-logos tradition, at least in the sense of a tradition of death and resurrection, of defenceless and disarming love; the scandal of Jesus' crucifixion and that of many martyrs after him. God reveals himself as wielding power over history, albeit not in the form of sovereignty but of the helplessness of the servant whom he raises up and sustains.

In view of the twofold meaning of the Christian tradition – specifically as (a) a tradition that discloses truth and meaning, with (b) ideologically critical and liberating power – a *confessing actualisation* of the past tradition of Christianity in our modern situation must necessarily have *a praxis-critical, liberating intention* which is essentially ideologically critical as well.

That is where I must leave it for now.

Ladies and gentlemen,

What I have said today is certainly not meant to be a kind of 'theological testament' of one who proposes to keep silent in future. It is rather the penultimate words of one who wants to continue telling his story but nonetheless hopes to have the wisdom to keep quiet when he eventually finds he has no more to say. I trust that others will tell me beforehand when that moment arrives. *Nemo iudex in propria causa.*

Being permitted to work as a theologian for almost the whole of my life moves me to profound gratitude, especially to the many who have confided their problems to me. That has enabled me to contribute, despite the legendary barrier of m**y** language, to the happiness of many people – both acquaintances and strangers – according to the motto I inserted in my book *Jesus: an experiment in Christology*: 'that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope' (1 Thess. 4, 13).

Chapter 4

LIBERATING THEOLOGY
Reflection on J.-B. Metz's political theology

For the first time in history Western theology, which until a few decades ago considered itself universal, has come to realise that it has always been regional. This insight dawned as a result of various theologies in the Third World, notably Latin American liberation theology, which, although originally inspired by certain trends in central and north European theology, has matured and now goes its own independent way.

If I were to look into the heart of my friend and colleague J.-B. Metz, I believe I would find there the following wish: if only I had called my theology liberation theology all those years ago instead of political theology (however apposite), a term that has led to all sorts of (unintended and unwanted) confusions and misconceptions. On the other hand the term 'liberation theology' has given rise to misconceptions of its own. Besides, to my mind liberation theology and 'salvific theology' (*heilstheologie*), a term that I have been using ever since 1945) are synonymous. Theologically liberation and salvation have both mystico-theologal and socio-political significance. The problem centres on what we Christians would and may call liberation and salvation in the full sense of both words: mystico-theologal, socio-political, individual-corporeal, psychosomatic and ecological. Theology serves no purpose if it is not liberating. In this paper I raise some points that Western theologians should keep in mind if their theology is to be truly liberating.

1. INFLUENCE OF THIRD WORLD THEOLOGY ON WESTERN THEOLOGY

1. Reversal of roles

For some years now Western theology, certainly as regards its themes, has been unmistakably influenced by the many forms of liberation theology. After a period in which only a handful of Western theologians took any interest in them, diverse forms of liberation pastoral ministry and theology, which originated mainly, albeit not exclusively, in Latin America as a result of Christian intellectuals' solidarity with spontaneously burgeoning basic

communities of paupers, are currently very much in the limelight among a broad spectrum of Western (European and North American) intellectuals. They have introduced a new, emotional polarisation into the discussion, in which their earlier political stances are recognisable. At the same time, inasmuch as Western theologians are in sympathy with liberation theology, they often have difficulty translating it analogously into their own Western situation. Yet in recent years J.-B. Metz for one has undeniably incorporated themes from Latin American liberation theology into his political theology project.

When listening to Latin American liberation theologians Western theologians may be wise to take note of Asian and African liberation theology as well. In 1976 Third World theologians took the initiative in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in forming the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians' (EATWOT); the conference proceedings are regularly published by the North American Orbis Press, and the quarterly journal, *Voices from the Third World*, regularly furnishes information. At the fifth EATWOT conference in New Delhi (1981) G. Gutierrez was able to observe that for the first time in centuries a new kind of theological reflection has arisen outside the major European theological centres and their North American counterparts – a fact which still evokes surprise, even scepticism and animosity, or paternalistic condescension.[1] The first radical consequence of these conferences was growing awareness of the existence of a distinct Third World theology, which led some scholars to adopt an increasingly vehement stance against Western theology – after all, it was that of their erstwhile conquerors and exploiters.

For Latin American liberation theology, too, these conferences had significant consequences. Asians and Africans reproached the Latin Americans for using a typically Western product, the Marxist method, to analyse society, which, they claimed, reduced race and gender, culture and religion to essentially politico-economic factors. And indeed Latin American theologians disregarded the cultural role of women and ignored cultural and religious identity in their analyses of their society. The pioneer of Black Theology, James Cone, opposed the interpretation of the race issue in terms of Western categories of class analysis: it went far beyond that. In Asia (especially on the part of D.S. Amalorpavadass and A. Pieris from Sri Lanka) there was an outcry against the reduction of problems of exploitation to purely politico-economic domination.

Since then a powerful feminist movement has sprung up, especially in Central America. As far back as the second EATWOT conference in Accra (Ghana) in 1974 considerable attention was devoted to sexism, which

[1] See the report of the EATWOT conference in New Delhi, 1981: *Irruption of the Third World*, ed. V. Fabella/S. Torres, Maryknoll, New York, 1983, 227.

permeated all culture, religion and theology in Africa, while the third conference (Sri Lanka, 1979) reproached Latin American liberation theology for allowing insufficient scope for culture and religion in society and focusing too exclusively on politico-economic dependence. Indian theologians put the accent on acquisitiveness and the need to oppose the power of money – Mammon.

The conclusion of the conferences thus far is clear: what has crystallised in the minds of Third World theologians is a sense that they represent a historical force that can subject the Western dominated 'international world system' to radical criticism. EATWOT's principal criticism of Latin America was that (in contrast to the non-constructive, sometimes naïve criticism of the Roman Curia) its theologians were blind to the fact that the nature and method of Marxist class analysis were too narrowly Western for a proper analysis of the peculiar problems of the Third World; after all, they argued, the method was itself determined by Western culture and the situation of the emergent modern bourgeoisie. The Western imperialist instinct may have penetrated our scientific and epistemological notions to the core. Western scientific methods with their control over objects are not as value-free as they purport to be. They tend to entail (albeit often implicitly) a philosophy that is not altogether innocuous. We need not agree in every respect with Kurt Hübner's criticism of scientific reason,[2] but (like others) he rightly exposes the limitations of the scholarly approach**.** This criticism was particularly forcefully expressed at the EATWOT conference in Sao Paolo in 1980.[3] But on one point there was consensus: the new movement was carried by people who were both exploited and religious, and who wanted to become subjects of liberating history.

To my mind the international, even intercontinental slant of EATWOT, in which diverse cultures and religions, including non-Western ones, converge, has been to the benefit of Latin American liberation theology; for some years now it has been revising some of its statements. EATWOT's dealings with invited Western theologians, on the other hand, have been somewhat strained, as evidenced by the Geneva conference.[4] Compared to the situation in the Third World, the West remains both exploitive and secularised, as opposed to

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[2] K. Hübner, *Kritik der wissenschaftlichen Vernünft,* Freiburg/München, 1978; also A. Wellmer, *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne*, Frankfurt, 1985.

[3] See report of the conference in Sao Paolo: *The challenge of basic Christian communities*, ed. S. Torres/J. Eagleson, Maryknoll, New York, 1981, 225-243.

[4] J. Van Nieuwenhove, 'Derde Wereld en de God van leven', in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 23 (1983), 253-269; also: 'De vele contexten in de Derde Wereld', in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 27 (1987), 21-36; Th. Witvliet, *Een plaats onder de zon: bevrijdingstheologie in de Derde-Wereld*, Baarn, 1984; E. Schillebeeckx, 'Theologie als bevrijdingskunde: Enkele noodzakelijke beschouwingen vooraf', in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 24 (1984), 388-402. Also see: E. Borgman, 'Bevrijdingstheologie als uitdaging aan de Westerse theologie', in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 27 (1987), 55-73, en: 'Theologie tussen universiteit en emancipatie: De weg van Edward Schillebeeckx', in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 26 (1986), 240-258.

exploited, religious people elsewhere! The difference is that all forms of Western liberation theology, theology of hope or political theology are concocted in an academic context; they are not supported by a concrete liberation movement or praxis, even though they do crystallise in the thinking of many progressive people and thus acquire a backing of their own. Yet they differ quite essentially from what is happening in Third World theology.

It has often been said that a Western liberation theology would have to be very different from that in, for instance, Latin America. While it contains a germ of truth, it conceals the fact that what happens on the East-West axis is to a considerable extent at the root of Third World suffering and protest. We cannot construct a Western liberation theology unless we Westerners acknowledge that our social structures necessitate Latin American liberation theology! In that sense we are part of their problem and must first listen to them before we can meaningfully speak to them in terms of our own, often academic traditions. Despite everything the West is not the incarnation of all evil. But considering the suffering that Western people have inflicted on virtually all cultures and the planet, we can only converse with Third World theologians penitently and humbly, even when we, maybe correctly, spot weaknesses in their theology.

In these circumstances, should a 'Western liberation theology' try to find its own way? Should the roles not rather be reversed so it forms part of Third World theology that looks at history 'from below', whereas we have been raised in the history of the powerful and the overlords? Apart from feminist theology, which is now being transplanted from the North American and North European West to the Third World, typically Western forms of liberation theology that are emerging − all aimed at liberating groups from social discrimination, such as homosexuals, minority groups, migrant labourers and the like – however imperative and crucial, are only comprehensible in the socio-historical context of affluent states. To Third World countries such theology remains a luxury for the time being. Food, clothing, housing and other primary needs may be material (materialistic, if you will) to the poor in the Third World; to affluent Westerners material poverty is a spiritual problem. That makes it even more apparent how inextricably a projected Western liberation theology is tied up with Third World theology, forms of liberation theology, Black Theology and feminist theology. Third World theology in particular should be seen as symptomatic of the flipside of Western history and what Europe has done to 'the world'. That is not sick self-pity but recorded fact. A book like Eric Wolf's made it disconcertingly clear to me.[5]

[5] E. Wolf, *Europe and the people without history*, Berkeley/London, 1982.

2. New ethical and legal situations

Partly on account of science and technology, the global economic interdependence of all countries is an undeniable fact. Consequently our actions – particularly political ones, both general and official – have important implications, not just for us but also for the Third World and the future of humankind. Ethically, according to criteria of universal human justice, our conduct in our own country confronts us with its consequences for ourselves, our ecological environment, the Third World and future generations of people all over the world. We can no longer confine ourselves to the question whether our actions here and now are fair and just to the immediate future of, for example, our welfare or our community. We also need to ask whether our deeds and omissions here and now are fair and just to all people in East and West, North and South, now and in the future. It concerns the well or woe of all humankind. That is the new ethical situation.

Naturally nobody can visualise the whole picture. People do not have universal providence; besides, the responsibility of an individual person or country is not on the same scale as that of, say, the European Community or the international community of nations. But the existence and presence in our midst of such a vast majority of suffering, impoverished and oppressed people (two thirds of the world population) call for an ethics of solidary responsibility for the future of the planet, and preferably for the future of the poorest and lowliest. It also calls for global responsibility for the integrity of nature as the human life world (whose limits are also our limits) and a just world economy, in which science and technology are not autonomous, the overriding priority being the Western economy. This responsibility exceeds the capacity of individual people or countries. It requires realignment on a socio-economic basis, with due regard to the real-life situation of people in poor countries, especially the poorest ones, and less to statistics about average national income (which, albeit correct, are confusing to ordinary folk). Economists often create the impression that they want to incorporate Third World countries into our global economic system, but don't seem to get round to the pressing issue of how we can, indeed must, adapt that system to the poor all over the world. We Westerners can no longer define our social and political identity without taking into account poverty and suffering, both in our own and in Third World countries. We cannot construct our identity at the expense of the identity of the poor among us. Recent statistics on the effects of necessary cutbacks − which, as implemented in affluent countries, hit the poor hardest − show that since 1981 the number of minimum incomes in the Netherlands have more than doubled. That brings us up against the question whether our humanity, the ethical awareness we have acquired, is not being jeopardised by politics that does not make a conscious choice for the poorest of the poor in our midst. Such

statistics cry out for a Western approach to liberation with practical intent. Along with others, theologians have their bit to contribute, in the form of a liberation theology as an interpretive element of an appropriate liberating praxis.

Hence if there is any difference between liberation theology in the First, Second and Third Worlds, it is that Western states call themselves social constitutional democracies, and up to a point that is what they are. That undeniably differs fundamentally from the approach to liberation under dictatorial regimes, both right and left wing, although it does not mean that we can export our Western democratic system to non-Western countries as the sole correct model applicable to all humankind. It raises the question of what a constitutional democracy is, and what justice it endorses from an ethical point of view. According to the definition of 18th century Enlightenment political philosophy justice means combatting erosion of other people's freedom, hence repression of one individual by others: the rights of one citizen end where the other's rights start.[6] But in this view the freedom of the poor, the property-less, is in no way prejudiced by the excessive wealth and economic power that others have at their arbitrary disposal, which is a travesty of the real-life situation. We tend to forget that the law of a country reflects a historically located, culturally determined conception of the human person, which informed the human values and norms of a particular era. After all, moral values do not necessarily concur with what is labelled justice in one's mother country, even though the ethical heritage of the past is vested in it. Hence justice is a matter of ethics. But not only are laws the products of people: conversely, people, contemporary people are the work or product of what our forebears considered to be just and unjust and enacted in their laws. Hence the prevailing legal system is both an affirmation of a particular anthropology that was dominant at the time when those laws were promulgated and with which subjects to those laws had to – and probably did at the time – feel at home. But humanity, what we consider humane, is itself a dynamic, cultural concept; it is a cultural, not a natural concept, however much it may be tied up with nature. Culture shapes people and people shape culture. Respect for – one's own and others' – humanity is vital, because life is permanent coexistence.

But assuming that codified laws are always based on a particular anthropology, it could happen that in times of cultural and social change many people no longer identify with that concept of a person and no longer accept it as a matter of course. In that case, is the person as defined in law still a person according to current human criteria? The question keeps surfacing in society and provides the grounds for periodic revisions of and amendments to the law. Something that was intended to safeguard human values when a law was

[6] I. Kant, *Metaphysik der Sitten*, Akad, Ausg, VI, 230.

originally enacted may affront our humanity in a new social order. Hence unrest and violence are often expressive of an underlying conflict in the actual statutes. Sometimes it leads to personal conflict, in which politicians in particular become embroiled. They, along with others, uphold 'the order' – but one defined in laws based on a given anthropology. In altered circumstances that same law can leave people out in the cold. Thus justice is certainly associated with ethical values and norms, although it does not coincide with these.

Humanity in the actual global situation, then, is not an obvious presumption, nor is it clearly written in the heavens for all (or only a privileged few) to see. What anthropology underlies our basic concepts of good and evil, justice and injustice? That is the crucial question. Our rule of law ('law and order') reflects a particular anthropology, that is to say, a concretely, historically situated concept of what a human being is. These anthropologies warrant critical scrutiny, for their validity is historical, not eternal. Historical analyses have established that originally laws worldwide were not dictates of rulers intent on securing their power. While some laws tend that way, originally many laws were, so to speak, enforced by governments to protect the people, even though they often did so reluctantly or as a concession so as to be able to retain their power in some other way in different circumstances.

3. Efficiency or justice?

After some shifts during the 1960s in favour of what were then called developing countries, for some time now the East-West axis is once again centre stage, to the detriment of the North-South axis. Third World countries are the victims. To make the point we call to mind some data on world trade and development cooperation.

The poor export results of Third World countries essentially stem from their power relations with industrial countries. The latter's political and economic preponderance enables them to put up effective barricades against products from developing countries. Especially after World War II all sorts of quantitative restrictions aimed at developing countries were introduced. A case in point is the agreement on cotton processing (Long-Term Cotton Textiles Agreement, 1962) and, in regard to certain agricultural products, the protectionist politics of the USA, many European countries, and eventually the EC. One may be astounded when a well documented English television series on the history of the African continent exposes past exploitation, but Western abuse of power remains, in a more subtle, covert way, the order of the day. It resulted in the birth of a movement in the Third World aiming at radical reform of the international economic system. Yet most UNCTAD conferences convened to pursue this goal failed. Western countries prefer to invest in areas

where economic development on Western lines is under way. This politics, adopted by many countries, led to the emergence of at least three readily identifiable categories of developing countries: (1) oil-rich countries with rapid development; (2) oil-poor countries with growing industrialisation; and (3) oil-poor countries with hardly any industrial development. There are also developed countries where a large majority of the population, especially in rural areas and urban slums, are far poorer than the average national income leads one to suspect. The conclusions of the fifth UNCTAD conference in Manila in 1980 reveal a sense of profound helplessness in the face of these new data.[7] Since then things have not improved; UNCTAD is par excellence the forum where the whole world, including developing countries and the Eastern bloc, negotiate favourable trade conditions for the Third World. But the fact is that the West is only prepared to negotiate on its own terms, at times appointed by the West, and in places where its economic clout can be felt. So the sixth UNCTAD conference in Belgrade was a total fiasco, and on the eve of the seventh conference in July 1987 UNCTAD is on its last legs.

Nonetheless the debt problem of the developing countries is getting more harrowing by the day. Many of them pay more in interest and debt redemption than they receive in development funds. Their exports (and ultimately that's what they must depend on) are increasingly curtailed by Western protectionist measures. The reality is simple: the Third World's only hope is that the tide will turn in the West. But the fact is that the West is no longer interested in UNCTAD. Is there the political will to thrash out a global economic system that is at least less unjust? The main problem of the forthcoming seventh UNCTAD conference is that it will not be about the dismal woes of the Third World but, alas, about the very existence of UNCTAD.

In contrast to UNCTAD's abortive attempts there is the Club of Rome, especially its RIO report and that of the Brandt commission.[8] These reports amended the fundamental principle of the liberal world economy **o**n humanitarian grounds and introduced the criterion of distributive justice. These efforts were meant to strike some sort of balance between the political autonomy of national governments in developing countries and their economic integration on a global scale. There were all sorts of objections from both right and left, while yet others tried to harmonise the 'New International (Economic) Order' (which was UNCTAD's project) with the model of the basic needs and

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[7] Earlier conferences of UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) were: Geneva, 1964; second: New Delhi, 1968; third: Santiago, Chile, 1972; fourth: Nairobi, 1976; fifth: Manila, 1980; sixth: Belgrade, 1982; next July (1987) the seventh conference will be held in Geneva. Also see: H. Van der Wee, *De gebroken welvaartscirkel. De wereldeconomie, 1945-1980*, Leiden, 1983.

[8] J. Tinbergen et al., *Reshaping the international order. A report to the Club of Rome*, New York, 1976; W. Brandt, *North-South: a programme for survival*, London/Sydney, 1980; also H.W. Singer & J.A. Ansari, *Rich and poor countries*, London, 1977; G. Helleiner, *A world divided. The less developed countries in the international economy*, Cambridge, 1976.

domestic consumption in Third World countries. According to this group world trade would have to be organised for the time being in zones comprising countries with comparable economic structures. Industrialised Third World countries and the poorest Third World countries would have to constitute separate world trade zones.

But this elicited widespread criticism from the Third World itself: the focal importance of the political factor was highlighted, as well as the serious question: is the organisation of world trade a purely economic, technical matter, or far rather a political one?[9] As may be expected there was a response from the economic School of Chicago, especially from M. Friedman.[10] To him efficiency is the cardinal criterion in organising the world economy and that demands a free world market, which he therefore advocates. The upshot of it all was that no one could find a workable compromise between the principle of efficiency and that of distributive justice.

Among all these widely varying economic views, which is a true reflection of a good, contented human life for all citizens in our world situation? There is no blueprint. Political action can never be purely a matter of steadily advancing utopia (which is always in the right**)**, nor purely of strategy and technology, that is technical application of a preconceived anthropology. What is civilised humanity in a global community of human solidarity? What is 'humanity' to Westerners that take both the Second and Third Worlds into account, and don't seek to safeguard their own welfare at the expense of others? We have become more modest and reticent about stating positively what humanity means here and now. History has taught us that people get to know the distinction between good and evil mainly from negative contrast experiences. It seems to me that in affluent states the distinction between good and evil, justice and injustice gets blurred because many people no longer have contrast experiences; they are too comfortable. In poor countries people feel that distinction in body and soul, in the suffering of contrast experiences: the status quo cannot and must not be tolerated. The contrast gives them a glimpse of what a good, contented human life could mean. I don't wish such painful experience on anybody, but it is the cradle, the most vital source of moral norms and values, as well as, in this country, of constant amendments to our laws. Hence every affluent, bourgeois[11] society should listen to people who do have negative experiences in their own environment and in the world at large.

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[9] See e.g. A. Tévoedjre, *Poverty, wealth of mankind*, Oxford/New York, 1979.

[10] M. Friedman, *Capitalism and freedom*, Chicago, 1967; M. Friedman & R. Friedman, *Free to choose. A personal statement*, London, 1980.

[11] A major study of the norms and values of Europeans clearly shows that explicit 'bourgeois' attitudes (crudely put: 'my freedom first, if necessary at the expense of other people's') still score highest. A book that, despite gaps, must undoubtedly play a role in a Western liberation theology is J. Stoetzel, *Les valeurs du temps présent: une enquête européenne* (preface: R.A. de Moor & J. Kerkhofs), Paris, 1983.

2. THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS OF RADICAL CONTRAST EXPERIENCES

1. Ethics of indignation

I now want to radicalise what I have previously called important human experiences, to wit negative contrast experiences. They are foundational, and I therefore see them as pre-religious, basic experience – hence accessible to all people – vetoing the world as it is. It has nothing to do with dualism or opposition between a good and a bad world in the Hellenistic sense (even if we may need to reconsider that dualism in light of more profound human experiences at that time). At all events, we have to deal with this world of ours, which is the source of our troubles. What we experience as reality, what we see and hear about daily on TV and other mass media is patently *not* 'in order'; something is seriously amiss. Reality is full of contradictions. So human experience of suffering, evil and misfortune is the basis and source of a radical 'no' that people say to the actuality of their being-in-the-world. Such experience is also more definite, more manifest than anything that philosophy and science can offer us by way of verifiable or falsifiable 'knowledge'. Indignation (not even a scientific term) appears to be a fundamental experience of life in this world. Our world, unless we pass through it with our eyes shut, is intent only on consumerism, pleasure and oblivion … or power.

Undoubtedly there is also great beauty and goodness, much that is enjoyable in this world. In fact, there seems to be more joy and song among the oppressed than among the oppressors. But all these fragments of goodness, beauty and meaning are constantly being contradicted and crushed by evil and hatred, by manifest and muted suffering, by abuses of power and terrorism. This contradiction, so typical of our world, seems to render evil and good mutually 'harmless'. That is how cynics see it. To non-cynics this attitude is anything but a sign of decadence, which no longer finds anything worth living or dying for. For all their wretchedness people are too proud to put evil on a par with good. Meanwhile our world continues to be a baffling mix of good and evil, sense and nonsense. History does not tell us which element in the mix will gain the upper hand, not even whether, seen from the angle of the actual events, a last word will ever be spoken. As history it may also miscarry.

Still, a positive element is that indomitable human indignation, the second element of this foundational experience. It has an ethical dimension, maybe even more than that. (Personally I discern in it what was known in Catholic religious tradition as *theologia naturalis*, although the context at that time was differently oriented.) This refusal to acquiesce in the existing situation offers an illuminating perspective. It reveals openness to a different situation that does merit an affirmative 'yes'. It could be called consensus with 'the unknown',

whose substance can never be positively determined: a new and better world which so far has never actually existed. To put it yet differently: simply positing the possibility of making our world a better place, openness to a nobler, unknown reality.

Thus people's fundamental veto of evil reveals an unspecified, hence open 'yes', as unshakable as the human 'no' – actually even more cogent, because an open 'yes' justifies and permits rebellion. Besides, from time to time there are experiences, fragmentary yet real, of meaning and happiness, be it on a limited or a grand scale, that revitalise the open 'yes', affirming it and keeping it alive. In such experience believers and agnostics find each other. It is also a ready basis for solidarity of everyone with everybody else and for a joint commitment to a better world with a human face.

2. Solid hope transcending all contexts

Believers in God give the single, two-sided foundational experience religious content. That puts the open 'yes' in sharper, more focused relief. Its origin is not so much – at least not directly – the transcendence of 'the divine' (the ineffable, as it were anonymous, inexpressible) but rather (at least for Christians) the recognisably human face of that transcendence that appeared among us in the man Jesus, confessed as Christ the Son of God. Thus to Christians humankind's perpetual grumbling turns into solidly based hope. In the innermost depths of reality lurks a desire for mercy, compassion … in which believers hear the name of God. That is the Christian story.

To Christians this hermeneutics of negative contrast experiences has to do with the confession of all churches that God is the one who 'created heaven and earth' and, in its original state, found it 'good', as well as with the Christian belief in 'original sin' that tarnished creation, and in Jesus' life and death 'for the sins of the world', which kindled new hope in our blemished world. On that basis we can build a solid theology of liberation and also test it – at least in the real-life context of the world we live in and of the religious community here and now.

Theology is always 'in context'. Present-day theology owes this recently acquired insight to the manifold forms of liberation theology in non-Western countries. Nonetheless contextual Christian theology wants to say something that is not tied to just one context but is accessible to many – indeed, all – human contexts, even if that reality, which is not humanly conceived but is raised for discussion as a result of 'conversion experiences', transcends all contexts, although we can only find words for it in some historically specific context, never outside it. Regional forms of Christian theology are never purely regional. After all, they concern our – always specifically located – humanity in relation to our fellow humans in a world that ultimately is 'God's world'. All

regional theologies want to proclaim the gospel in a concrete situation, especially in people's personal lives.[12] That calls for all sorts of socio-analytical, hermeneutic and practical interpretations (not to be analysed here).

3. *Divine salvation by means of liberating human deeds*

The hermeneutics of negative contrast experiences, especially in our time, compels us to look at the massive, monolithic block of perils that beset humankind. Consider the arms spiral, international disputes, global hunger, pauperisation of the Third World, its debt burden and unemployment, resurgent racism, degeneration of our natural environment, discrimination against women and minorities, one-sided scientific and technocratic culture, bidding history farewell, impoverished perceptions, loss of spirituality, et cetera. A positive will to combat these threats could unite people in solidary action. Since Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Bergen-Belsen and the rest, and the stranglehold on our ecological environment (being symbols of the 'demonic' in our history) we can no longer theologise and speak as a church in the same way as before. We have to find a new political accord between the gospel and our political life world. This has a crucial implication, namely the end of liberal pluralism.

Negative, radical contrast experiences compel us to find new, this time non-fundamentalist, unambiguous consensus instead of the erstwhile liberal pluralism of many modern theologies, beliefs and forms of church action. Solidary action against life-threatening hazards may give us a new yet authentically evangelical slant on our basic religious creeds, which remain 'doxological' in the sense of being celebratory, giving praise and thanks, but also unfetters their political dimension.

Nowhere in human history can we find God-given salvation history unless liberating praxis containing autonomously human meaning is presupposed in it; such human meaning is, so to speak, the substance or medium of God's salvific deeds, without which God is 'powerless'. After all, to Christians human history, inasmuch as it frees humans to live in true, authentic humanity and mutual respect, is God's salvific act. It is an awareness, independent of us, of this gracious salvific structure, but not without conscious human acts of liberation. Theologians tend to overlook this. It is not a matter of simply translating, as it were, a veiled, purely 'ontological' relationship, specifically with God, into mental categories. In that case religious interpretation would be a pointless 'superstructure'. It concerns the religious meaning of consciously human, liberating acts that generate communication.

[12] See my farewell lecture, inserted in this volume (chapter 3): 'Theological interpretation of faith', expanded in: *Church. The human story of God* (Volume 10 in these *Collected Works*), 63-86 [065-088].

4. Beyond dualism

Until the eve of modernity the great biblical, patristic and medieval Christian tradition did not conceive of a dual human destiny: a 'natural' destiny and, over and above that, a gracious, 'supernatural' destiny. Thomas Aquinas in particular firmly rejected the notion of a dual destiny. Even though (in response to medieval Augustinianism) he recognised the autonomy of human sectors of life, he (like Augustine) recognised but one ultimate destiny for human beings: a religious one, namely gracious communion with the living God and love among humans thanks to God's salvific initiative, which is also the core of his act of creation – in a nutshell, the kingdom of God, that is, wholeness of creation, the world and humankind. Considering the sinfulness of historical humans, this communion necessarily includes forgiveness, reconciliation and peace with God and humans. On this point Christians are in agreement.

Remarkably, it was not until the 15th century – the dawn of what is now called modernity – that there was a rift with the past. Luther came with his doctrine of 'two kingdoms', and his contemporary, the Catholic Dominican theologian cardinal Cajetan, following some precursors, launched the doctrine of the dual, natural and supernatural destiny of human life (hence the possibility of a *natura pura*, i.e. God could have created humans without a supernatural destiny as well) – at all events, a highly non-Thomist proposition. There were historical conditions for the origin of these two 'modern' theories, but we cannot dwell on them here.

At the start of the 20th century, on the basis of historical Thomist studies, the neo-Thomists rightly reverted to the authentic view of Thomas and the entire medieval church. That was the climate in which I was moulded as a young theological student. Human beings can have but one destiny; grace presupposes that the various sectors of human life, autonomous in themselves, are predetermined**;** their sinful aspects are corrected and also elevated, positively linked with or raised in the mystico-theologal or religious dimension of grace, which includes faith, hope and charity. 'Nature' is the better for 'grace'. Nowadays people use different terminology, but it is the same problem.

In this regard the Reformed theologian, Prof. Dr Harry Kuitert of the Amsterdam Free University, through meticulous analysis of concepts, shed light on many issues and cleared up many misconceptions in his book, *Alles is politiek, maar politiek is niet alles* (Everything is politics but politics is not everything) (Baarn 1985). Nonetheless I do not share his fundamental position. In his discussion of my little book *Jesus in our Western culture: mysticism, ethics*

and politics[13] Kuitert says that the main difference between his view and mine is that I call God the heart and ultimate source of all truly liberating human praxis, whereas according to Kuitert human praxis isn't and cannot be liberating, so it can never be the place where we find God and his salvation. On the contrary: human praxis ought to be liberating, but it is not. Counter to these overly pessimistic views, I argue that, inasmuch as politics is truly liberating (and it often or sometimes is – we are not dealing in statistics), it is indeed the stuff of God's salvific acts, just as loving treatment of a fellow human being is the stuff of God's love assimilated into the mystical or religious relationship with God.

My position is based on the belief that Jesus' God, like the Lord of Israel, identifies with the poor: "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them … and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:7-8). God in his sovereign freedom decided to link such freedom to the erratic, risky, 'contingent' course of this world's woeful history, especially to the lot of the poor and the oppressed. That leaves history open and 'undecided', in no way inevitable or (in scientific Marxist terms) in accordance with the logic of development. History is and remains open: an undecided adventure. 'We shall overcome' remains historically in the balance and hence partly dependent on what people do or fail to do. If God's identification with the poor, attested by both the Old and the New Testament, does not exist, then Kuitert is right all along the line, and all forms of liberation and political theology would indeed be mere expressions of a naïve human desire to escape from the harsh realities of this world. But if you believe in a 'God of humans', who in Jesus confessed as the Christ wants to realise 'God's people', you also have to believe, despite everything, in human beings and what they choose to do. If anything speaks to me from the Old and the New Testament, it is that God sides with the poor and the oppressed. That has nothing to do with 'earthly messianism'; indeed, Jesus rejected all this-worldly, political messianism: the crucified outcast is the Messiah, none other.[13] In our history the one whom Christians call the Messiah was vanquished by violence. To separate salvation history from the real history of the oppressed who want to free themselves and are prepared to give their lives for this only makes sense to victors. But liberating deeds (which as human actions are assimilated into God's covenantal acts) have an immanent meaning of their own, which refers to the transcendent God precisely because of his identification with the poor and the oppressed. On the one hand, therefore, it is a matter of not lapsing into spiritualism that reduces divine salvation to forgiveness and reconciliation, but

[13] C. Duquoc, *Messianisme de Jésus et discrétion de Dieu*, Geneva, 1984.

on the other we must avoid lapsing into this-worldly political messianism, for the great challenge to any apocalyptic Christianity is that after Good Friday and Easter the history of violence and injustice carries on as usual.

5. Traces of the liberating God

Nonetheless traces of God's acts must be discernible at the socio-political level as well. Divine salvation cannot be reduced to human praxis. Praxis of God's kingdom or following Jesus is more than that. But without human praxis sustained by grace faith in an eschatological future is vacuous. No socio-political progress can ever atone for the injustice that has caused so many deaths. Nonetheless God still offers a future when liberating human praxis fails. History remains an open adventure; here there is no room for naïve Enlightenment belief in progress, but there is eschatological hope that inspires us to establish fragments of salvation here and now. And that does happen, not only in face-to-face interpersonal love but also in 'political' love. Without corresponding praxis the kingdom of God will never come. It does not 'befall' us automatically, in contradiction to or irrespective of our doings and omissions. "Do not be conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2) is a criticism of its sinfulness, not of the fruits of the Holy Spirit that are also to be found in that world! If the poor do not feature and fail to become subjects of history, history irrevocably becomes the domain of unremitting violence. Hence it is refreshing to hear impoverished Latin American Christians attest that they experience their liberating praxis not as the only place where God can be found, but as the one reserved for the poor. That experience is not just a subjective interpretation, but refers to a reality independent of them and one that is based on evangelical conversion, which makes them enter into God's actions. Faith in the God of the resurrection of the dead and of judgment, the God to whom past suffering, the sawdust of history, does not merge into anonymity forever makes Christian love of God politically operative as well. No-one would claim that this makes Christians' behaviour in this world easier. But the problem cannot be solved by invoking a doctrine of two kingdoms that contradicts the oneness of history, whereas it remains an incontrovertible fact in Christian tradition that, through his actions, God ultimately *unifies* history. That has to do with his identification with the history of the poor and the oppressed and certainly not with the history of oppressive and repressive victors – *their* history falls under his judgment.

Liberation theology, salvation theology and political theology are helpful to explain what it means to speak about our day-to-day 'profane' world and society in terms of salvific promises inasmuch as it frees people and they can find themselves, freed from themselves in order to be free for others. Inevitably that makes theology vulnerable. For the very reason that God is God and not

part of the world, hence of our construction of it, one cannot confine or pin him down to any human liberation movement. Whilst he is the source and the core of authentic human liberation, he cannot be identified with any specific historical instance of liberation, not even with the liberation of the Jewish people in the Exodus history. The name of God, to Christians 'symbolised' in the name Jesus Christ, can be abused by liberators and oppressors alike. That is the reservation arising from the divine way in which he is a liberating God.

Chapter 5

DISCONTINUITIES IN CHRISTIAN DOGMAS

In one of his − to my mind − most important articles Ted Schoof gives a sober, penetrative outline of the role of discontinuity in defining the identity of a person, a tradition or a culture (as the case may be). He writes:

> "A Christian theologian would locate the fundamental reason for the changing role of history in a kind of primordial tension that is peculiar to Christianity as a religion and that may even be something of a paradox: the Christian churches cite a very specific historical event – something done to and undergone by Jesus of Nazareth and a band of followers in the country of Palestine some two thousand years ago – as their origin and paramount event, but at the same time consider that event to have absolute, universal significance. From the outset one observes Christian thinking grappling with this conflict between historical contingence and enduring (and in that sense immutable) value, for instance when the concrete, dynamic Judaeo-Christian thought forms in which the key events were expressed had to be translated into the more static, abstract ideas of Western Graeco-Roman thinking. … Can one translate Jesus' plastic parabolic language into a detached, theoretical discussion of nature, being and person that derives from Hellenism and aims at universal validity? Can the historical contingence of the Jesus events survive such a transformation?"[1]

Quite a long quotation. In it, nonetheless, the colleague and confrère honoured in this festschrift succinctly outlines the theme I propose to deal with. For if holy Scripture and the movement launched by Jesus, whom Christians were to confess as the messiah, were already grappling with the problem posited by Schoof, then what the Catholic Church came to call dogmas would be all the more directly challenged by the aforementioned 'primordial tension that is peculiar to Christianity'. What concerns me in this article is in fact the continuity and discontinuity in enduring Christian dogma.

[1] T.M. Schoof, Geschiedenis en theologie: een haat-liefde-verhouding?, in: *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis* 101 (1988), 510-524, 510 (our translation).

1. THE PLACE OF DOGMAS IN THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CONFESSED AS THE CHRIST

1. What is a dogma?

In Greek word 'dogma' primarily means simply that which can pass as correct or true. In a Greek philosophical context dogma means an opinion, view or doctrine, but also an edict or decree (e.g. in Luke 2:1: with reference to Jesus' birth it mentions an imperial 'dogma' or edict to conduct a census; and in Acts 16:4 Luke said that Christians had to observe the dogmas, i.e. decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem). Hence the word also has an element of binding authority, and that civic meaning was to play a major role in church history.

What is known as dogma in modernity – one might say since the 16th century Counter Reformation – used to have a far more flexible meaning. It was not even designated by the term 'dogma'. Right into the Middle Ages philosophical notions, false thought systems, Christian religious ideas and the like were simply called dogmata, conceptions. In my view what is meant by dogma now was known as the Christian confession in New Testament times; in post-apostolic, patristic times it was called the 'apostolic kerygma' or 'apostolic creeds', like those adopted by the great councils. In the Middle Ages (and Thomas in particular synthesised them brilliantly) they were known as *articuli fidei*, articles of faith, in the sense of 'joints' in the cohesive body of beliefs, which have mainly two aspects. Not all religious truths are called articles of faith, only those that belong to the core of Christian belief and are marked by a special degree of difficulty, whereas ordinary ones can be understood via and in terms of their subordinate relation to the central Christian message. This was not stipulated by canon law, but lay in the degree of closeness to or distance from God's self-revelation, being the revelation of human beings to themselves. Articles of faith, says Thomas,[2] are key religious truths relating directly to God as the salvation and happiness of humankind. The Second Vatican Council, too, spoke – with some references to the medieval doctrine of the *articuli fidei* – of religious truths located closer to or further from the key message (I would call them secondary and tertiary) and finally about non-revelational ethical norms, truths that revolve around what is called the key message of Jesus the Christ. Vatican II expressed this in its doctrine of the *hierarchia veritatum*:[3] religious truths are arranged in hierarchical steps. All this clearly shows (on internal grounds) what is meant by fundamental dogmas.

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[2] Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, a. 1 and a. 2, and especially a. 6. See e.g. J.M. Parent, 'La notion du dogme au XIIIe siècle', Série 3, in: *Etudes d'histoire littéraire et doctrinale du XIIIe siècle*, Paris/Ottowa, 1932, 141-163.

[3] Decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 11.

In Christian tradition since the 16th and especially since the 19th century dogma or a dogmatic affirmation – albeit originally called by other names – came to acquire a highly formal, legally specified meaning. Dogma, irrespective of its fundamental, secondary or even tertiary position in the hierarchy of religious truths, is a binding religious truth proclaimed by a competent ecclesiastic authority. That narrows the meaning of what was meant by dogma in earlier church history.

The 19th century concept of dogma has two distinct dimensions: firstly, the correspondence of a given ecclesiastic decision or religious definition with a revealed truth, hence one which under divine authority is binding on believers; and secondly, the actual formulation of that revealed truth, which is as it were fixed by a decree of the competent doctrinal authority – hence the expression 'proclamation of a dogma'. A dogma is like an edict of a competent doctrinal authority regarding the formulation of a religious truth. Thus it has two levels that differ greatly in value. They may not be identified with each other, for that would be to confuse, or even wrongly identify, creaturely, hence purely finite, relative authority with uncreated divine authority. So from the outset dogma entailed a sharp, inbuilt polarity between unimpeachable authority – God's – and relative, finite, fallible authority: that of humans. For even in their capacity as ecclesiastic office bearers they remain mortal, by definition fallible humans. Any infallibility that a dogma may possess derives solely from infallible divine revelation, which is, however, expressed in language by humans and ecclesiastic authorities, whereas the phrasing in human language as such is never infallible and merely refers to the true, binding mystery of faith that encompasses it. Marred, sometimes even mutilated, the dogma nonetheless speaks about revealed truth. It is this kernel of infallible truth and the human husk in which it is enclosed that constitute the complex problem of dogma. For nobody – no pope, bishop, lay believer or theologian – can ever come to grips with the infallible core 'as such'. That core of truth is embedded in humanly finite phraseology or expressions that are always open to improvement. What strikes one is the tension in the concept of dogma: notwithstanding inadequate, imperfect formulation, it still deals with religious truth, traceable to divine revelation. In solemn proclamations of dogma the doctrinal authority always refers to the help of the Holy Spirit, just as that Spirit acts in the lives and faith of all God's people. But what is frequently not mentioned is that the Spirit's help is neither automatic nor magical, but is filtered by the free will, intellect and experience of human authorities. Hence the gift of the Spirit is either conveyed positively through these authorities' free cooperation with God's grace, or negatively warped by unfaithfulness, intrigue and manipulation, if not culpable negligence, resulting in a marred, mutilated formulation of the truth. Historical instances even indicate that the explicit invocation of the help

of the Holy Spirit often implies a concession that the rational arguments adduced are insufficient to persuade believers (as in the case of the notorious section on contraception in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae,* which is explicitly addressed to the priesthood).

But in the same 19th century people's (including believers') conception of the problem also changed markedly. The 'Catholic' Tübingen school occupied itself with the development of dogma, making people aware of the sometimes bizarre evolution and mutations in the history of origin of dogma. Ever since all manner of theories about the development of dogma and tradition have been circulated.

In a general ecumenical sense (also in non-Catholic Christian churches) dogma means the doctrine of the Christian faith inasmuch as it cannot be relinquished, because it derives from God's word. Non-Catholic Christian churches are more inclined to speak of 'forms of unity'

2. What is revelation?

Dogma presupposes divine revelation, but even that does not descend directly from heaven. It happens in the process of historical human experience. God's revelation manifests itself only in historical events: an experiential, interpretive process, which is actually an up and down, fumbling learning process of religious people in a given tradition, who, believing in God and with due regard to the signs of the times, look for the meaning of their human life on earth. Revelation is just as much the work of searching, interpreting human beings as it is (for that very reason) the work of God. As a result faith has to do with the absolute, but never in an absolute manner, hence only historical, purely relative absoluteness, imperfect and open to correction. Introducing an antithesis between so-called 'objective revelation' and 'subjective religious experience', as some church leaders (propounding an unrealistic, disastrous 'objectivism') propose, conflicts radically with the concrete developmental history of both the Old and the New Testament. The one does not exist without the other. It is a false antithesis.

If revelation itself is such a precious but vulnerable phenomenon – not a 'possession' – we need to be more careful, and especially more modest, when we speak about the church's infallible dogmas. The primary question in this regard is, what does the doctrinal authority's claim to infallibility imply?

3. What is papal infallibility?

a. Vatican I: truth and ambiguities that sneaked in

The First Vatican Council in 1870 proclaimed the dogma of papal infallibility. In effect it laid down when an ecclesiastic religious pronouncement constitutes a dogma. Because of the many misconceptions in this regard it warrants scrutiny.

The official church has never claimed personal infallibility for the pope; that would be heresy. Hence the council fathers immediately scrapped the original title, '*De Romanorum Pontificum infallibilitate*', replacing it with '*De Romani Pontificis infallibili magisterio*'. This in itself is a trifle ambiguous, for the intention is clearly the pope's doctrinal authority inasmuch as it is infallible. The doctrinal authority does not always speak the truth! Hence the person of the pope is not infallible, only certain very special, official doctrinal pronouncements are 'free from error', and then only under all sorts of stringent conditions that can be summed up as follows: when the pope addresses the entire church invoking his supreme authority (i.e. the exercise of his Petrine office, and not e.g. in his capacity as patriarch of the West or bishop of Rome, positions he holds in addition to his Petrine office) and speaks 'ex cathedra', thus articulating the entire church's infallible faith in a particular contemporary version. In so doing he may accept that the whole process of meticulous formulation has 'temporary support' from the Holy Spirit (as cardinal Guidi put it at the time).

The critical point is that the infallibility of the church does not derive from papal infallibility. On the contrary: papal infallibility derives from the risen Christ's promise to his entire church that it will dwell in the truth to the end of time (albeit with ups and downs) and the truth will dwell in it. Despite everything, despite all sorts of stormy waves on a turbulent sea, the small boat of the church is – ultimately – on course. That does not mean that all church members possess the 'charism of truth' in equal degree, but it does mean that this charism is in fact present in the church. Certain papal acts, in unity with the world episcopate, or of the episcopate worldwide in unity with the pope, are particular concretisations. That is the doctrine of Vatican I.

The trouble with, or rather the ambiguity in the declaration of Vatican I is that literally at the last minute, mainly at the insistence of cardinal Henry Edward Manning, the previously approved formula that such a solemn definition is *ex sese irreformabilis* (i.e. in and of itself irrevocable) was augmented with the clause, '*non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae*' (not by virtue of the church's consent). The insertion could create the impression that the pope could solemnly proclaim a doctrine 'on his own'. That was certainly not the intention of the Council. After all, what was the situation?

The First Vatican Council was influenced by the aftermath of Gallicanism, which maintained that papal decrees were totally valueless unless backed by the support of the world episcopate. But the context makes it quite clear that a papal decree ex cathedra required, even demanded, the prior and concurrent consensus of the world episcopate, hence the *consensus fidelium* or *sensus fidei* ('consent of the faithful' or 'sense/light of faith') of the entire church. The insertion, 'not by virtue of the church's consent [are dogmatic declarations

irrevocable]', merely denies that the papal formulation still requires further retrospective approval by the world espiscopate, as it were countersigning its legal validity as a 'royal decree'. In other words, there is no papal *infallibilitas separata*, in the sense of a separate, independent, specifically papal infallibility. His infallibility is that of the church as a whole, which by virtue of the pope's consensus in unity with the world episcopate and in accordance with the *sensus fidei* of the entire church, is solemnly pronounced. In the Council the Dominican cardinal Filippo Guidi made this clear in a forceful, all but sensational manner. The pope, he said, cannot make infallible statements on his own, but only with the consent of the world episcopate, which is in fact whence he derives the charism of infallibility to which the entire church is entitled. Many councillors, who were opposed to the minimalists but even more opposed to the maximalists, explicitly refused to accept – I am quoting cardinal Guidi – that the pope could proclaim any dogma whatever at his own discretion and in his own right, independently of the church.[4] Because of this intervention pope Pius IX read him the riot act, especially because of the support he received from the floor, and throughout the Council he put him under unbearable pressure.

Mgr Felix Dupanloup's proposal to omit the ambiguous insertion, 'not by virtue of the church's consent', was rejected, whereas he proposed '*innixus testimonio Ecclesiae*', namely that the pope can only proclaim a dogma in consensus with the church.[5] This did not really come across to the Council (which ended hurriedly because of the outbreak of the Franco-German war), neither did the proposal of infallibility maximalists who wanted to impose a clause that papal definitions are irrevocable *ex sese* and did not require even the church's *consensus antecedens, concomitans (et subsequens*).[6] Thus the dogma of Vatican I boils down to this: there is no papal *infallibilitas separata*. A papal pronouncement only constitutes an ex cathedra definition if it has the prior and concurrent consensus of the entire church. All that was rejected was the

[4] C. Butler & H. Lang, *Das I. Vatikanische Konzil*, München, 1961, 376 and 414-426. See the latest major studies: G. Thils, *L'infaillibilité pontificale. Source, conditions, limites,* Leuven, 1969; A.W.J. Houtepen, *Onfeilbaarheid en hermeneutiek; De betekenis van het infallibilitas-concept op Vaticanum I*, Brugge, 1973; H.J. Pottmeyer, *Unfehlbarkeit und Souveränität; Die päpstliche Unfehlbarkeit im System der ultramontanen Ekklesiologie des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Mainz, 1975; A.B. Hasler, *Wie der Papst unfehlbar wurde; Macht und Ohnmacht eines Dogmas. Mit einem Begleitwort von H. Küng*, München/Zürich, 1979. Regarding dogmatic formulations, inter alia: M. Wiles, *The making of Christian doctrine*, London, 1967, and *The remaking of Christian doctrine.* (The Hulsean Lectures 1973), London, 1974; J.P. Jossua, 'Immutabilité, progrès ou structurations multiples des doctrines chrétiennes?', in: *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 52 (1968), 173-200; N. Lash, *Change in focus*, London, 1973.

[5] R. Aubert, *Vatican I*, (Histoire des conciles oecuméniques, 12), Paris, 1964, 230.

[6] R. Aubert, ibid., 229-230.

consensus subsequens, that is the retrospective approval that Gallicanism required.[7]

The trouble is that in our century the memory of Gallicanism has faded completely, which makes the insertion by a few cardinals – not without some unedifying manoeuvres – of the 'not by virtue of the church's consent' so ambiguous. For the historical report on Vatican I by Mgr Vincentius Gasser makes it quite clear that the Council considered the prior and concurrent consensus of the church as a whole essential for a papal dogmatic declaration.[8]

Finally, according to the Council the view that the such definitions are irrevocable *ex sese* does not mean that they are so by virtue of papal authority. *Ex sese* refers to the definitions themselves: they are infallible in their own right, since the pope is in duty bound to draw his dogmatic decrees from revelation and (to use a graphic expression) from the religious arsenal and potential of the church as a whole. He himself is subject to norms. Viewed from the angle of the final texts and episcopal interventions, hence without regard to diplomatic and psychological pressure from above as well as the somewhat unedifying lobbying, the intention of Vatican I is clear and anything but sensational or shocking to anyone who studies it historically and substantively (even though that is only one side of the coin).

True, the dogma proclaimed is marred by all sorts of ambiguities (as a result of subtle manipulation by a few 'infallibility maximalists') and is therefore open to improvement and correction, the more so because the broader context is not properly emphasised. Let me point out three ambiguities: the terms 'infallibility' and 'irrevocable', and the expression 'not on the basis of the consent of the church'.

b. The broader context of Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council adopted Vatican I's definition of infallibility almost verbatim, but put it in a broader context. That in itself obviated some ambiguities, but left others intact, thus missing an opportunity to put and end to all the mystery and magic surrounding what is known as 'papal infallibility'.

Firstly, the council only deals with papal infallibility in chapter III, after first dwelling on the 'mystery of the church' and 'the people of God' (who share Jesus Christ's prophetic task), in which the 'charism of truth' or 'infallibility' already features. According to chapter III papal infallibility follows from that, not the other way round: it concerns a papal and episcopal service to the church's 'infallible faith'; that, essentially, is its source!

[7] See J.D. Mansi, vol. 52, col. 1024.
[8] Ibid., col. 1205-1221.

A second improvement on Vatican I is that episcopal collegiality in the proclamation of a papal dogma is strongly accentuated. In proclaiming a dogma the pope is not speaking as a private individual. Each dogma also expresses the 'universal consensus' of the entire people of God (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 12). The Council declares that the infallibility of the church – the entire church – also inheres in the college of bishops (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 22). This is followed by a much more refined view of infallibility than that of Vatican I. According to Vatican II the subject of infallibility is not the pope, but the college of bishops headed by the pope. Hence when defining dogma the pope has to act as head of the college of bishops. The fact that he sometimes defines a dogma on his own and on other occasions in conjunction with all the bishops (i.e. in a council) does not imply two acts by two different subjects. It concerns two procedural routes of the same subject. The only difference is the circumstance that in one case the 'one moral subject' (the college of bishops, including the pope) is dispersed all over the world, whereas in the other the many members of the same moral subject are gathered in one place, namely a council. In the second case collaboration and consensus are manifested publicly and the personal presence of all parties allows more careful appraisal of the nuances in the definitions.

Hence it would be better not to speak of papal infallibility (the expression is elliptic and misleading) but rather of the infallibility of the world episcopate together with the pope as head of that college, and then only in regard to certain exceptional acts. Vatican II puts the matter into an even broader perspective, although it did not work out the details, namely – and here we quote the theologian Ratzinger before he started his career as bishop and cardinal[9] – as follows: this view includes a moral commitment of the pope and the world episcopate to the voice of God's people. The pope and the bishops have to heed the voice of the entire community of believers before solemnly proclaiming a dogma. To that I would add: in order to embody it concretely special representative organs of God's people will have to be created. The text of the New Testament gives us a cue: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us…" Who are the 'us'? "The apostles and elders, with the whole church" (Acts 15:22, 28).

c. Remaining problems after Vatican I and Vatican II

Finally, overall the Roman Catholic Church's position in regard to this dogma is a doctrine that is ecumenically acceptable and by no means as mysterious or magical as popular comment would have it. The only thing is that the terms used – notably 'infallibility' and 'irrevocable' – remain impediments.

[9] See *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche,* 'Vatikanum II', vol. I, 356.

Is 'infallible' really the obvious, apposite word for what is meant by the truth quality of a dogma? The word evokes all kinds of false association. 'Inerrancy' (the term Protestant Christianity applies to the Bible), that is freedom from error, would be an improvement. But why not simply call a spade a spade by opting for the terms 'true' and 'truth'? A dogmatic tenet of faith is a truth given in Jesus Christ. After all, that is what one means to convey! A truth is true, neither more nor less. What does 'infallible' add to that … except heightened pseudo-certainty? What difference is there between truth and infallible truth?

The same applies to the term 'irrevocable' (*irreformabilis*). When one uses the term 'true' (in itself quite a presumption!) it immediately suggests (and a good thing too) that every dogma is open to improvement, that its meaning may change, et cetera. For we must not lose sight of Thomas's dictum: *fides terminatur non ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem*[10], that is to say, the act of faith really refers, by means of conceptual expressions (*enuntiabile*), to the matter in hand (*res*), the point at issue. The medium of culturally determined concepts does not make the *res* that the dogma is about subject to revision, only the way that dogma is phrased in human terms, images, concepts and judgments. While the words may be revocable, they remain an essential part of the dogmatic definition. That is the next problem to be analysed.

2. PARTLY BECAUSE OF CHANGES AND DISCONTINUITIES IN FORMULATION DOGMA REMAINS TRUE

The subjects of faith are human beings, but they are also cultural beings. They live in various, divergent cultures. For that reason they model their Christian faith on the concrete culture in which they live; it is the medium through which they assimilate a living faith and in which that faith is actually experienced by people living here and now. There is a kind of osmosis between faith and culture, albeit – hopefully – with some critical Christian reservations. The socio-cultural transmission of faith means that when the socio-cultural pattern or paradigm and its concomitant living, experiential and mental categories change radically, believers find earlier cultural forms – including that of their religious tradition − problematic. What we are dealing with, therefore, is not a separate religious problem but fundamentally a socio-cultural problem with obvious implications for all social domains, including the religious sphere. This discrepancy has to be remedied if the Christian faith is to remain recognisable to present-day people as belief in the gospel of Jesus confessed as the Christ. In that case a historical break with bygone cultural

[10] Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, a. 2 ad 2.

forms may be the only possible way to reformulate dogma so that it remains true to the gospel and the Christian religious tradition.

From this it is clear that present-day faith always has 'two poles': Christian revelation (the experiential and interpretive tradition of Christianity that started in Israel), which can be epitomised as inherited dogma, and the socio-cultural situation in which believers live here and now. The ever new present enters into the redefinition of the past. After all, if traditional dogma is to remain alive in our age, not only the altered circumstances but the age-old dogma itself demands redefinition and reformulation of the religious truth it presents. If not, the dogma itself becomes untrue, indeed heretical in the new ideological climate.

First I analyse the basic structure of cultural change and a-synchronicity. Then we look at the details of some real-life examples of changes in various dogmas.

1. Conjunctural and structural changes

I do not propose embarking on a methodologyical debate on the concept of paradigm. In Thomas Kuhn's book alone Margaret Masterman[11] discovered 21 different meanings of the word, hence of what a paradigm shift entails. In my view a paradigm has to do with the known historical problem of 'periodising' history. Historians and cultural analysts divide history into cultural eras, each displaying distinctive features, at any rate to people looking back on history (centuries later). My premise is not Clifford Geertz's definition of religion but his definition of culture. He regards culture as 'a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life'.[12]

Some people may ask about the pattern or paradigm of, for example, the cultural period known as medieval Catholicism.[13] Although one could probably add further aspects to Prof. A. Weiler's portrayal of the Middle Ages, it is basically accurate. Yet to me this (and virtually all) periodisation is problematic. For instance, the trichotomy (called typically medieval) of paradise, the fall and restoration or redemption, already to be found in the patristic paradigm, resurfaces in the post-medieval Reformation paradigm and, after the Reformation, in the entire new paradigm of modern theology. The fact is, however, that postmodern people are no longer able to identify with that

[11] M. Masterman, 'The nature of paradigm', in: I. Lakatos & A. Murgrave (eds), *Criticism and the growth of knowledge*, Cambridge, 1970; Th.S. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, Chicago, 1970².

[12] C. Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures,* New York, 1973, 89.

[13] A. Weiler, *Zijn de Middeleeuwen nu echt voorbij? Over verschuivingen in het katholieke paradigma,* Nijmegen, 1987.

trichotomy and even reject it out of hand. The same applies to the christological model of hypostatic union, which posed no major obstacles to faith throughout three periodic paradigms – patristic, medieval and modern – whereas postmodern people again find it poses insurmountable problems. Thus three paradigmatically divergent periods still display an underlying unity, with postmodern people emerging as vehicles of a truly new paradigm.
The problem can be clarified further from another angle. I see striking parallels between the medieval (hence Western) Roman Catholic paradigm and that of Arabic Muslim philosophy in the same period known (in the West at any rate) as the Middle Ages. My question is whether what is known as the Catholic faith in the medieval paradigm is in fact a structural paradigm. In other words, is it really typically medieval? The fact that patristics, the Middle Ages and modernity – despite fundamental conjunctural disparities – concur on so many points, whereas New Testament and postmodern Christians are wholly unable to think in terms of that paradigm, makes me think that the aforementioned three paradigms together constitute a single cultural era, each displaying *different conjunctural* paradigms. No less a thinker than Martin Heidegger said that up to the era of modern high technology the West belonged to *eine Epoche*, a single cultural period – that of metaphysics, which is only fizzling out in postmodern times. That greatly, if not essentially, modifies the schema of successive paradigms presented by Hans Küng and adopted by Weiler.[14] Where does meaningful talk about a clearly defined paradigm start and end?

In passing I merely ask whether Wittgenstein's concept of 'family likenesses' in his critique of both essentialist realism and nominalism is not more useful to describe cultural periods. The likenesses include both similar 'ways of saying things' and parallels in 'what is said', although the latter do not preclude fundamental substantive differences. The concept of family likenesses does not assume that all specific features considered typical or 'definitive' of a given period have to be found in each and every instance. In that case it is no longer a matter of one or more abstractly determinable common features; in this model one roundly acknowledges both similarities and radical disparities. Thus the medieval thinker Thomas, in his very medievalism, differs completely from, for example, Bonaventura. In his medieval Augustinianism Thomas could assign a constitutive place to Aristotle and Arab philosophy, hence to the 'autonomy' of the profane, which was totally alien to the medieval Augustinian pattern of his day. To what extent can Bonaventura and Thomas be classed in the same category of the medieval paradigm? Or must we rather think of transcendent, hence divergent elements

[14] H. Küng & D. Tracy (eds), *Theologie − Wohin?*, Gütersloh, 1984, and id., *Das neuere Paradigma von Theologie*, Gütersloh, 1986.

in a single, typically medieval paradigm, which could herald a new cultural epoch?

Weiler identifies elements in the Middle Ages that could link that period to a post-medieval paradigm. Historically the Middle Ages indeed contain elements that are consistently overlooked when we refer to the 'medieval paradigm'. Weiler sees modernity as a departure from familiar elements traditionally regarded as 'medieval', but he also discerns continuity with other, consistently overlooked aspects of the medieval view of humans, the world and God in a spatio-temporal structure. In effect his answer is: the aspects of the Middle Ages that used to be considered classical are gone, but other medieval elements that cultural philosophers or analysts have disregarded are still very much alive.

My problem is that, whereas these very neglected elements indeed fall within the medieval paradigm outlined by Weiler, in the form that they are living presences in our midst today they are not at all medieval. Hence I don't really understand the question, are the Middle Ages really over? Christian faith always addresses us via a cultural medium, and some believers still appear to be able to think in medieval cultural terms. We are living in a time of cultural a-synchronicity. That makes the present-day polarisation among Christians possible and understandable, and up to a point inevitable.

2. Some angles on, and concrete examples of, dogmatic changes

I mention six angles from which the history of dogma displays both internally coherent developments and discontinuities that make dogmatic shifts and discontinuities transparent, understandable and even inevitable.

A first reason to temper the so-called 'immobility' of dogma is the expressive power of the language in which it is phrased. After all, the meaning of language, hence of words and utterances, is not the same in all contexts or in one period relative to another. Thus the meaning of the words 'person' and 'nature' in our day differs completely from that of the same words as used by the christological council of Chalcedon when it said that the man Jesus was one person with both a divine and a human nature. If this were to be echoed verbatim today, it would be not only heretical but also gibberish, for it would amount to saying (to put it somewhat crudely but realistically) that Jesus was something like a mermaid with a human torso and a fish tail. To modern people a being that shares our human nature is by definition a human person – something explicitly denied, not by Chalcedon, but by the neo-Chalcedonism that grew from it and that has come to dominate many churches since that time.

A second example is this. In a bull dated 1 October 1567 Pius V anathematised the Leuven theologian Baius (Michel de Bay), and on 31 May

1653 pope Innocent X anathematised bishop Jansen(ius) of Ypres (Flanders), whereas the two theologians' pronouncements were in fact taken directly from texts by Augustine and the famous, influential Augustinian council of Orange known as Arausicanum II of 529. What that council had approved was declared heretical by subsequent papal bulls. The question is whether the issue was really the same, even if based on literally the same pronouncements. The case is also interesting in that the anathematised theologians were conservatives, not progressives – a rare exception in church history. Both of them taught that without grace human nature is incapable of any ethically good action whatever: virtues of non-Christians are in fact camouflaged vices. They claimed this because they were using the word 'nature' in the Augustinian sense, but that was a totally a-synchronous usage, since in Western Aristotelian, non-Augustinian theology since the 14th century the word had come to be used in a very different sense. As a result contemporaries in the Western philosophical conjuncture of the 16th and 17th centuries understood Baius's and Jansen's statements as the direct opposite of what Augustine had meant in his earlier texts. Nonetheless the a-synchronicity of conjuncture and language continued to fool highly orthodox Augustinian theologians; in their day people simply no longer thought of nature in Augustinian terms. The word had undergone an Aristotelian metamorphosis.[15]

A second reason is the inevitable opposition between reality and our purely conceptual, plastic, even metaphoric and symbolic phrasing of revealed reality as we know it. No dogmatic formulation can ever fully and perfectly articulate the intended religious truth. It will always fail to verbalise the revealed mystery it is speaking about intelligibly. Whenever new human profane or religious experiences arise, whenever human knowledge in its search for truth expands, new questions are asked. And dogmas formulated in past centuries do not provide adapted answers to these. The substance of dogmas like hell and purgatory changes completely when believers in a different religious context realise that the punitive, vengeful God that emerges from the traditional formulations of hell and purgatory could not possibly be the God of Jesus and Christianity. Either the dogma has become irrelevant, or one has to find a different, deeper meaning. Hence the dogma's historical formulation is erroneous, yet it seeks to secure a religious truth, albeit with the wrong means.

The council of Florence is another intriguing example. It stated explicitly: "The holy church of Rome firmly believes, confesses and proclaims that nobody – not just heathen, but also Jews, heretics and schismatics – can inherit eternal life outside the Catholic Church, but will go to hellfire 'prepared for the

[15] See e.g. H. De Lubac, *Augustinisme et théologie moderne*, Paris, 1965; J.H. Walgrave, *Geloof en theologie in de crisis*, Kasterlee, s.a.

devil and his angels' (Mt 25,41), unless they are admitted to the church before their death" (Denz. / Schönm., no. 1351; our translation).

In our era this was reiterated by Gregory XVI in 1834 and in 1863 by Pius IX, whereas the Second Vatican Council contradicts it radically, positing:

> "Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or the church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of their conscience" (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 16; ET W.M. Abbott c.s., 1966).

A completely different picture. The Vatican II decrees on religious freedom and the world religions go even further, for *Lumen Gentium* does not specify what 'seeking God' actually implies. Does it mean explicitly going in search of God? Or is it to give those panting with thirst a gulp from our own almost empty desert flask? For Matthew's Gospel (25:31-26) and Vatican II – at any rate its decrees – affirm the latter.

Does that mean that the first Florentine dogma was false and only the Vatican II dogma is true? That would confound the church's conception of dogmatic truth completely and simply falsify it. But the second formulation does not contrast with the first as if it asserted a falsehood. Our knowledge of truth is always perspectival, in the sense that we discern truth from a particular angle. Truth as we know it is filtered, as it were, or broken up as if by a prism. As Christians the council fathers experienced salvation in the church by grace of Jesus Christ; for them personally there was no salvation other than that found in him. Denying that to themselves would be tantamount to self-damnation: consciously sinning against a personal experience that determined and occupied their entire lives. Their only mistake was to objectify this personally experienced truth in an abstraction, and from that to infer that everyone outside the church was excluded from divine salvation. While the inference is fallacious, it does not make the truth that the Florentine dogma wanted to and in fact did convey *untrue*. Nonetheless it does obscure and distort the proclaimed truth through the objectified approach adopted in the dogma. This is not a diplomatic exposition that seeks to gloss over or explain away the contradictions between differing pronouncements by the church's doctrinal authority, but merely highlights the *perspectival* nature of all human knowledge, including religious knowledge. (At an ethical level there are in fact contradictions between the doctrinal authority's pronouncements, but at that level the meaning of 'infallibility' is not an issue.)

A third reason is the opposition between faith and both the socio-cultural and the ideological situational context. In reviewing dogmas the doctrinal authority draws on certain ways of thinking, what cultural philosophers call *le croyable disponible* of a given cultural era, which also features prominently in

my by now earlier work, *Jesus: an experiment in Christology*.[16] By this I mean the socio-cultural and ideological situational context in which we actually live, think, believe and operate here and now. This constitutes the arsenal, as it were, of the present *Zeitgeist* and collective cultural heritage with all its historically confined pros and cons.

Hence dogmatic truth, too, is always imbedded in thoughts and ideas – indeed, 'realities' – that in themselves have nothing to do with the dogma but are taken for granted (usually uncritically) in a particular cultural era. A striking example (that also illustrates the point at issue) is the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 (a trap in which the so-called new World Catechism still ignominiously ended up). In the face of burgeoning dualistic Manicheism in the Middle Ages the council's dogmatic response was to aver that everything that existed was created by God. To illustrate the dogma the council then summarised the various kinds of beings existing according to the contemporary worldview: purely (anorganic, organic and animate) material things, beings comprising matter and mind such as humans, and finally purely spirit beings like angels and demons. From this many theologians and popes inferred that the existence of angels and demons was a dogma. That is by no means the case, certainly not on the grounds of the conciliar pronouncement of 1215. That council did not remotely intend to explicitly dogmatise the existence of angels and demons. At the time nobody contested their existence! On the contrary. To some, in addition to God as the first principle of all goodness, there was also a spiritual first principle of all evil. That was what the council was reacting against. Its real intention was to pronounce on the fact that everything that existed apart from God was *his creature*. At the time everybody believed in the existence of a realm of angels and demons. Hence if it existed, it followed that it formed part of God's creation. The council wanted to say no more than that, even though all the councillors at the time regarded angels and demons, not as primeval symbols of good and evil, but as living, personal realities. The council did not deny their possible existence, but neither did it assert their existence; it did not answer that question. Dogmatically it made no stipulation. Hence it remained a free decision for believers and they could not attack fellow Christians for not believing it.

Fourthly, there is the step-by-step hierarchy of religious truths. If we place the term 'dogma' in the Christian tradition of Catholicism as a whole, it is clear that we believers cannot profess that faith in Jesus the Messiah and the trinitarian belief it implies (however it is conceived of) are on a par with acceptance of historically evolved ecclesiastic structures, such as 'seven sacraments, no more, no less' laid down by the council of Trent, or an

[16] E. Schillebeeckx, *Jezus, het verhaal van een levende*, Bloemendaal, (1974) 1982[8], 38-42 (ET *Jesus: an experiment in Christology*, London/New York, 1979.

episcopal or presbyterian structure and the position of the Petrine function in that structure, or everything that the church order (evolved in historically contingent situations as it is, but still the prevailing one, decrees about the relation between laity and clergy, especially when it comes to the sacramental ministry.

I cite one example of the practical consequences of this hierarchy of religious truths. There are Christian theologians who deny the existence of eternal life for both Jesus and humankind as a whole, whereas they fully accept communion with God in the grace of Christ within the limited lifespan from birth to death. But, they maintain, death is the end of it all, including the communion of grace. However, the immediate grounds for the – at any rate Christian – belief in eternal life is not the Greek doctrine of the immortality of the soul, but believers' gracious communion with the eternal God during their earthly life. God does not terminate the communion he initiated simply because we are mortal humans who have to die some time. That would be to drop us at our moment of supreme need. It cannot be true that humans become throw-away objects to the Christian God – a God of the living, not of the dead – and certainly not at death. In view of that, can one accuse theologians like J. Pohier of heresy if they wholeheartedly affirm the principle of what is known as eternal life, and celebrate it liturgically, but cannot accommodate its inner implication, namely hope of eternal life? Vatican II's doctrine of the hierarchy of religious truths assured those who declared such theologians heretics and deprived them of their ministry that one can actually be unable (for whatever reasons, even depth-psychological ones) to accept a particular inferred article of faith, whereas the fundamental legitimatisation of that article nonetheless constitutes the very core of what the alleged heretic lives by!

A fifth reason is the communicative structure of ecclesiastic proclamation. To genuinely communicate the faith to new generations of people requires that virtually every dogma be reformulated if it is to remain alive in changing times. An unrealised dogma formulated centuries ago is like a fossil, a museum piece, hence a research object for theological archaeologists. By literally presenting an ancient dogma one may be proclaiming truth, but a dead truth, a mummy. In a secular world a definition of truth that does not contribute to more humane solutions of historical – including dogmatic − problems encountered in the church and the world is almost bound to be experienced as a strange, barren, bizarre oracle. After all, giving a pre-formulated answer to a question we are no longer asking is no answer to us. It tells us nothing; in fact, it alienates believers from that dogma. Communication breaks down, and in such cases some church leaders tend to accuse their followers of frivolous secularisation and superficial laxity. Dogmas are only understood and accepted with heartfelt assent by Christians if they are

experienced as true answers to their religious questions in terms of their contemporary situation. Personally I would venture to say that, no matter how true dogmas may be in the historical context in which they were formulated, they may become totally irrelevant in another historical context. A dogmatic pronouncement is only valid in terms of the question it is supposed to answer and the language game in which the questions and answers are articulated. Answering an unasked question is always a shot in the dark; it is neither true nor false: outdated truths become plain irrelevant. They do not communicate!

Finally, a purely theoretical demand for meaning is often a reason to modify the immutability of a dogma, prompting redefinition. Greater human awareness and knowledge acquired over time, which bring fresh opportunities as well as new crises, create a need for more refined, lucid, differentiated and contemporary formulations of traditional dogmas. Again an example is the best way to explain it.

This time I cite the dogma of original sin. The council of Trent solemnly declared the reality of original sin a dogma, and that declaration tells us something quite real about our human condition. Every human being who enters this world arrives to a society that is a product, partly of a lot of good that happened in the past, partly of the accumulation of a lot of evil. The actual society into which we are born exists, so to speak, in a state of sin. The 'sin of the world' precedes our free will. Even before we embark on a voluntary act we are already in a situation that willy-nilly prompts – but does not compel − us to sin. Because human beings are situated in a history of both salvation and doom, evil affects all people even before they act. The external situation becomes an inner state as well. We are already steeped in sinfulness, as it were; it has lodged in our inner being as a vague propensity and remains as a threat of personal sin. That is the crux of the dogma.

But in phrasing this state intelligibly the council of Trent did not have the benefit of this modern, intelligible conceptual armoury. It saw no solution (along with Augustine, Thomas an others) to express it other than by laying down a dogma that through procreation the personal sin of the so-called first human couple was passed on to all descendants of Adam and Eve, so all people enter the world with a blemished soul (*macula animae*). That is the origin of the, to us, absurd term 'original sin': a sin inherited from others by birth. Obviously no Christian in a secularised world can take such a story seriously. For the past decade the church's doctrinal authority, which a mere thirty years ago still objected and instituted proceedings against any radical reformulation of the dogma of original sin by modern theologians, has left them totally free in this regard, as well as in the denial of monogeny, more specifically that all humans are descended from the same two parents, Adam and Eve. The doctrinal authority not only yielded to the advances of modern science, but

also came to realise that in the literary genre of Genesis it is not a matter of two parents, the historical progenitors of the entire human race, even though the mythical narrative portrays them thus.

I have selected only six reasons why the church should remain aware of the relativity inherent even in dogmatically binding or ex cathedra pronouncements. Actually it boils down to an acknowledgment that every dogma has to be *re-experienced* anew by human beings and can never bypass the experience of the religious community on pain of coming across to believers as a dead museum piece, interesting no doubt as a religio-cultural artwork from the past, but offering present-day believers no religious value or orientation. Historical human experiential processes are recorded in language, which is mostly metaphoric and symbolic. In fact, religious language lives by metaphors, images and symbols. I have often said in the past that religious language should use 'stretched' concepts to convey ideas that are modelled purely on this-worldly experience when articulating articles of faith.

The need for an experiential basis for every dogma also indicates that dogmas, while legitimate, are often contingent, non-essential developments derived from the New Testament, although not conflicting with it: they could also have developed differently. Without the distinctively Greek philosophy of the 4th to 6th century a dogmatic formulation like that of Chalcedon would never have happened, and one might ask what African Christians are to make of such a Hellenistic Christian dogma.

3. ATTITUDE OF BELIEVERS TOWARDS NON-EX CATHEDRA PRONOUNCEMENTS BY THE *MAGISTERIUM AUTHENTICUM*

Whereas some modern popes and theologians distinguish between the church's ordinary doctrinal authority and its extraordinary doctrinal authority – a distinction that, remarkably enough, was not made by either Vatican I or Vatican II – I have noticed that after Pius XII up to the present that distinction has vanished from the documents and a new one has been introduced: a distinction between 'the infallible doctrinal authority' and what is known as the *magisterium authenticum*, which, whilst referring to the same ecclesiastic doctrinal authority, indicates its day-to-day, non-infallible exercise. The latter is our concern in this section.

In view of its recent prominence the best example of the problem is the recently published encyclical *Veritatis splendor* ('The splendour of truth'). From its prehistory we know that it is not officially a dogma or so-called infallible declaration. Two weeks before it was proclaimed, following a gathering in Rome of some seventeen cardinals and presidents of episcopal conferences, the section which states that believers were to accept these papal pronouncements on certain ethical problems as an infallible declaration was scrapped under

heavy pressure from a number of cardinals. That was reported by reliable, first-hand sources. But at the public press conference where the encyclical was presented to journalists cardinal Ratzinger said that there had never been any intention to declare this encyclical infallible. Of course, what was at issue was not the encyclical as a whole, but only a particular passage in it that should qualify as 'infallible'. Be that as it may, cardinal Ratzinger herewith officially stated that the encyclical was not infallible, hence was fallible. Nonetheless the fact is that in regard to non-ex cathedra pronouncements, since the non-acceptance of no. 14 of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* on birth control by the vast majority of Catholics, one discerns a maximalist trend in official Vatican documents as well as in the so-called new World Catechism to keep non-infallible, hence fallible, official ecclesiastic pronouncements in the closest possible proximity to infallible definitions: they fall, it is said, '*within the logic of*' (a favourite expression of the theologian J. Ratzinger) or are '*an extension of*' (an expression from the so-called universal World Catechism, no. 891) declarations that lay claim to our religious obedience.[17] This seems to be a final effort to pretend they were as good as infallible. In fact, maximalists remain convinced that the doctrine of *Humanae Vitae* is infallible. The great achievement of this encyclical for the church and ecumenism – and we may well see it as a movement of God's spirit – is that it at no point professes that its pronouncements on 'the intrinsic sinfulness' of certain summarised themes (e.g. the use of contraceptives, masturbation, practising homosexuality, premarital relations, etc.) are infallibly true! Even the word '*irreformabilis*' is avoided – at any rate, it does not appear in the encyclical. What does appear is a cautiously used term that at first glance seems to refer to it, namely that what is at issue is an enduring doctrine.

From the angle of dogmatic history and church politics these points are probably more important than the contents of the encyclical, even though it deals with fundamental existential issues that are weightier than methodological theological problems. But clear-cut answers to these problems can also spare believers a burden imposed not by God but by fallible humans. And that, too, can be a matter of life and death.

Theologically and hermeneutically declaring the encyclical fallible certainly does not mean that it is false in itself, that is actually erroneous, but merely that it may contain fallacies. Often the prehistory of an official ecclesiastic document is more pertinent to our understanding of its final conclusion than its literal text, whose material purport, without the real-life historical context, may mislead readers.

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[17] Inter alia *Instruction of the Congregation of the doctrine of faith,* 1974, nos 17 and 23; also the new World Catechism, no. 892.

But what flabbergasts me is that an encyclical should be officially declared fallible on the one hand, while on the other the same encyclical should be presented as binding on believers *as though it were infallible*. The requirement of inner agreement with the encyclical features prominently in the encyclical, even beyond the proportions that Vatican I and II consider necessary to legitimatise the fallible *magisterium authenticum*. The degree and manner of obligations that the encyclical prescribes for Catholics are clearly in line with the post-*Humanae Vitae* maximalist trend. However, in Catholic tradition it has invariably been customary for a fallible doctrine to remain open to serious, if respectful, public dissent and debate. It started as far back as Paul's personal opposition to Peter, right up to the present where the new ecclesiastic code soberly declares: "No doctrine is understood as defined infallibly unless this is manifestly evident" (*C.I.C.*, can. 749, §3). In conclusion I analyse the implications of this, with reference to Vatican I and II.

This non-infallible encyclical in fact deals with major, vitally important problems of our time: ethical norms and values that have not been, and fundamentally cannot be, revelational, but have to be found creatively in the dialogue of all people, Christian and non-Christian, who are searching in ever varying situations for the meaning of true humanity here and now as a binding norm for all participants in the real-life situation. Such creative searching is not a matter of *subjectivist* ethics, as is commonly averred. Christians, non-Christians, humanists and atheists are all looking for norms and values that transcend caprice. Thus the Ten Commandments or Decalogue in the Old Testament represents a Judaic adoption of the ethics prevalent in higher Middle Eastern cultures at the time. The Torah merely sealed this universally human ethos with the name of YHWH; Israel had to 'obey' the Ten Commandments before YHWH's countenance, just as the New Testament letters of Paul, and especially those of the Pauline school, and the human, natural ethics of the universal Stoics in Hellenistic ecumenism are as like as two peas. Paul merely adds that Christians have to adopt and experience that human ethos, which Christians share with others (e.g. the marital relationship between husband and wife), 'in the Lord', hence before God's countenance. That already waters down the Stoic subjection of wives to husbands, which Paul took over uncritically, with the requirement of Christian charity (which Paul impressed on Christians all along), and in the long run (centuries after Paul, for the issue required clear insight into concrete social structures and awareness of their mutability) was completely rejected as counter to human dignity and therefore inhumane. The same applies to slavery. Neither the Old nor the New Testament speaks of the *revelation* of human ethical norms and values. Ethics is a socio-historical phenomenon, a historically situated quest for a humane response to the ever new, changing situations in which history

places the human race. The First Vatican Council explicitly rejected an amendment, proposition no. 45, which asked the council to extend infallibility to all moral principles propounded by the church as well: instead the Council affirmed that only evangelically ethical (in effect 'theologal') principles that formed part of the deposit of faith, could be considered objects of 'infallible pronouncements'.[18] In this matter the reformability of ecclesiastic ethical injunctions is even more explicit. In this area the doctrinal authority may even be totally mistaken, and historically this happened regularly.

This encyclical also communicates a roundly pessimistic view of Western civilisation at that time. Despite the criticism that Christians, non-Christians and cultural critics level at the Western world, one cannot but wonder whether this exaggerated pessimism does not serve to extol what are known as Christian values even more emphatically, a common trait of moralists who depict the world as gloomily as possible so as to contrast more vividly with the salvific 'radiance' shining down on it from heaven above – an age-old historical stereotype, but nonetheless a prophecy of doom to which John XXIII prophetically and rightly objected at the opening of Vatican II. Here it behoves Christian churches to be far more modest, especially since in modern times 'the world', rather than the churches, was the first to recognise humanitarian requirements in brutal situations, where the churches used to keep quiet.

I analyse the encyclical on only one point, being the papal demand that this non-infallible doctrine had to be accepted nonetheless solely on papal authority and that even experts were not permitted to publicly criticise it on pain of professional banning and that Catholic institutions would forfeit their right to call themselves Catholic (see nos 110-116). Professional moral theologians were asked to set an example in loyal *inward* and *outward* agreement with the Magisterium's teachings in both the dogmatic and the moral domain (no. 110). It also says that in the event of dissent such disagreement with aspects of the encyclical should not be voiced publicly in social communication media, since this was counter to the church's' communion and the correct interpretation of the hierarchical constitution of God's people (no. 113). It points out the believer's right to receive Catholic doctrine in its unadulterated integrity. I concur with this last point: moral theologians should not withhold the church's official proclamations from the faithful. But ecclesiologically this certainly does not mean that they should refrain from voicing their criticism. Besides, is it psychologically feasible to agree inwardly with something that you see as white, whereas the pope requires you to see it as black, when it is really a matter for rational argument?

[18] See H. McSorley, in: J.J. Kirvan (ed.), *The infallibility debate*, New York, 1971, 85 and 101, n. 65, in regard to H. Küng, *Unfehlbar? Eine Anfrage*, Einsiedeln, 1970. Cf. Decree on Ecumenism, no. 11.

This is the point I want to clarify, citing Vatican II. I concede that the adamant position of the encyclical's author certainly stems from his holy conviction that he dwells in the truth and that what he forbids in the encyclical is absolutely prohibited for him in all circumstances, that it concerns the life and death of humankind. And ethical issues may in fact entail decisions about the life and death of a particular culture. Hence I fully respect the basic intention of the encyclical. But that does not answer the big question about the source from which the pope derives the concrete ethical norms he lays down. On the one hand they are not revealed, on the other the encyclical completely disregards historical, human existential experience. What other source of truth does that leave except a nonexistent, abstract, a-historical image of human beings? Here the pope had a splendid opportunity to teach the Western world in particular that however much Christians have to defer to science and technology, their profoundest existential problems will never be solved purely by science and hi tech. In that perspective the secular world is in need of an authoritative moral voice. Hence to my mind the encyclical is a lost opportunity, both to the church and to the world.

The dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* no. 25, which the encyclical in fact cites as its main witness, explicitly states that believers (naturally referring to Roman Catholic believers) owe religious respect of will and intellect to the pope's authentic doctrinal authority, even when he is not speaking ex cathedra, thus respectfully acknowledging his supreme doctrinal authority and sincerely accepting his pronouncements according to the sense in which they are conveyed. The latter is apparent either in the nature of the documents, or in the regular repetition of the same doctrine, or in the manner in which they are spoken.

Ex cathedra pronouncements demand religious obedience (*obedientia fidei*); the fallible '*authentic* doctrinal authority' demands only religious respect (*obsequium religiosum*). That is an essential, fundamental distinction already made by Vatican II. Canon 833 of the new code stipulates this *obsequium religiosum* in a number of canons. According to these documents the detailed moral views of the encyclical in no way demands religious agreement or irrevocable inward assent, merely religious respect.

The degrees of respect for church leadership, in this case its doctrinal authority, is measured in terms of the degree of authority exercised. But there are criteria indicating in how far a given document imposes and speaks on its own authority, for that affects what the believers' duty to assent entails. *Lumen Gentium* mentions three criteria. Mgr G. Philips, who (as far as I can remember) personally formulated this text in *Lumen Gentium* and, along with the theological committee, rejected some proposed amendments to no. 25 ad hoc, explains the official intention of the text as follows. With the best will in the

world experts, for instance moral theologians, ethicists or other scientists, may, on the basis of weighty counter arguments, be unable to agree inwardly with a papal pronouncement that in their own minds they view differently. Philips wrote this in 1967 by way of interpreting this conciliar document, a year before the publication of *Humanae Vitae*.[19] Thus Vatican II recognises the right to hold dissident views regarding non-infallible doctrines of the church's doctrinal authority. But, Philips quite rightly adds, such dissidents must be extremely prudent and avoid a public debate by *non-experts* if this would confuse believers even further.

Officially, then, it is acknowledged that unanimous, uniform consensus is not required; there are possible gradations depending on the gravity of the issue and the strength or weakness of the arguments adduced by the doctrinal authority. By *'obsequium'* Philips does not mean submission (as the word is sometimes rendered), but respect. 'Religious' respect means that it is not based *exclusively* on rational grounds. But this already poses a problem or ambiguity. Non-ex cathedra pronouncements cover a wide range of possibilities: from ponderous encyclicals, bulls, *Motu proprios* and synods to statements in ordinary speeches, in weekly Wednesday audiences, on official visits to a given country, and the like. The First Vatican Council already referred to the stringent conditions the pope has to satisfy when making non-infallible pronouncements, namely that 'religious *obsequium*' should not be interpreted as not founded on rational grounds. On the contrary, the further removed a pronouncement is from the core message of the revelation (which applies particularly in the ethical domain), the more it has to rely on human, scientific and other forms of knowledge. By the same token the doctrinal authority will have to undertake a more searching study and research and there will be a greater need to disclose the exact rational grounds of non-ex cathedra pronouncements, especially when a whole lot of experts object to a particular papal teaching. We learnt all this from the renowned Mgr V. Gasser, relator or reporter at the First Vatican Council.[20]

But the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* actually silenced all experts and their rational arguments. Inwardly they may be angered by it, but they have to endure this tribulation in silence as a private sorrow (as cardinal Ratzinger recently explained, albeit on another occasion but in the same context). Here the encyclical definitely exceeds its brief, and even ignores ecclesiastic, conciliar guidelines.

There have been earlier signs that the pope, irritated by Catholics' wholesale disregard of some ecclesiastic ethical tenets, wanted to press on

[19] G. Philips, *L'Eglise et son mystère au IIe concile du Vatican. Histoire et commentaire de la constitution Lumen Gentium*, vol. 1, Tournai, 1967, 323-324.
[20] See note 7, col. 764D and col. 1225D.

regardless out of personal conviction that they are infallible. One such instance is to be found in the *Osseruatore Romano* (5 June 1987, p. 5). There it is averred literally that the pope had said in an audience only a day earlier that contraceptives do not fall in the domain of free debate among theologians; and, he added, any statement to the contrary means corrupting the moral conscience of married people. What it boils down to is that, although all such pronouncements are fallible (hence not in themselves fallacious, but at the same time not intrinsically true and correct), believers should still *pretend* they were infallibly true. This authoritarian tactic of disempowerment came into the limelight when, on the publication of Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae,* the Vatican's press secretary, Mgr Vallainc, responded to a journalist's inquiry whether the encyclical was infallible by stating candidly but quite unambiguously: not by a long chalk – that is clearly evidenced by the absence of all official terms used in ex cathedra pronouncements; they are nowhere to be found in this encyclical. Three weeks later the illustrious press chief was fired by the Vatican: the man had spoken the manifest truth, which it preferred not to divulge.

There are other instances. In its responses to the *Modi,* that is its substantiation of the rejection and acceptance of amendments to Vatican II in regard to Christian dissidents, the theological committee explicitly stated in what would be called in modern, non-ecclesiastic terms its 'explanatory memorandum' only days before the official approval of *Lumen Gentium* no. 25: the Council does not want to harden the positions; it sticks to the belief that substantiated dissent with an official but non-infallible church doctrine remains possible and cannot be undone by purely authoritarian postulates. Although dissidents should behave prudently, the church can never silence them. In regard to the prudence required in public dissent, the explanatory memorandum says: "*melius remittitur ad probatos auctores*", the Council makes no further comment, the advice of relevant experts should be sought. Dissent and public debate remain permissible and possible after the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor.* With due regard to the rules of respect (for the doctrinal authority) and prudence (with a view to non-expert believers), the encyclical could be refuted, even publicly, especially if it was known that on some points its content would trouble the conscience of many believers. In that case it would be unchristian cowardice to conceal the dissent of many believers; it would also officially legitimise the incorporation of hypocrisy into the ecclesiastic system.

In conclusion I revert to the introductory quotation from Ted Schoof, who is honoured in this festschrift. In the same article he writes the following:

> "In the scholastic theoretical framework as it became entrenched from the late Middle Ages onwards, especially in later centuries, including the actual

> equation of core beliefs with the most exact doctrinal definitions possible, historical alteration of religious formulations can only be conceived of as logical unfolding. More recent theology, on the other hand, has become convinced that this ruling fails to recognise the recalcitrance of historical data and especially the distinctive nature of religious, symbolic language in these formulations. Religious language lives by images and symbols that remain heavily dependent on the context in which they originated; for Christianity that is the historical events around Jesus that it regards as its primordial datum. Hence one needs to return to them continually in order to retrieve, in terms of one's own cultural context, the full meaning of these ancient images and symbols. In keeping with Kuhn's paradigm shift this form of theology maintains that current religious formulations need to be continually tested against both that primordial datum and our changing experience of it, and may then have to be adjusted or even replaced."[21]

That is precisely what I tried to do in this chapter − at any rate in regard to dogmatic formulations of the faith – as a teacher listening to his pupil.

[21] T.M. Schoof, Geschiedenis en theologie: een haat-liefde-verhouding?, in: *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis* 101 (1988), 523 (our translation).

Chapter 6

THEOLOGICAL QUESTS

1. CLARIFICATION AND SPECIFICATION OF SOME CONCEPTS IN ECCLESIOLOGY

A. *Proposition*: Faith and culture learn from each other and give each other colour, even local colour. As a result 'continuity' only comes about via discontinuities. People are subjects of faith and are cultural: they are cultural beings.

Diachronically, that is over time, and synchronically, in the present in which we are living, people – including believers – participate in and contribute to diverse cultures that are like the skin of their bodies and souls. The 'actual' culture in which believers live, the culture on which their Christian faith is in fact *modelled*, is also the filter through which their living faith is *assimilated*, and the medium through which those living today *experience* their faith. There is a kind of osmosis between faith and culture, albeit – hopefully – not without critical Christian reservation. The two have to learn from each other; each makes a distinctive contribution to every question or problem. Nobody lives in a super-temporal, super-spatial panorama. We are trapped in time as human beings who nonetheless have a transcendent dimension, even though that, too, is necessarily lived in space and time. This socio-cultural transmission of faith means that when a cultural pattern or paradigm changes radically, along with its experiential and mental categories, believers find existing cultural forms problematic, including those of their traditional faith. What is at issue, then, is not a specifically religious problem but an essentially socio-cultural phenomenon – obviously with implications for every social sector and thus for the religious and ecclesial sphere as well. This discrepancy has to be remedied if the Christian faith is to remain recognisable to present-day people as belief in the gospel of Jesus confessed as the Christ. In that case a historical break with bygone cultural forms may be the only possible way to reformulate dogma so that it remains true to the gospel and its reverberations in our history.

From this it is clear that present-day faith always has 'two poles': Christian revelation (the religious, experiential and interpretive tradition of Judaeo-Christian religion), which can be epitomised as inherited dogma, and the socio-cultural and 'religious' situation in which believers live here and now. The ever new present enters into the redefinition of the past. After all, if traditional dogma is to remain alive in our age, not only the altered circumstances but the age-old dogma itself requires redefinition and reformulation of the religious truth it presents. If not, the dogma itself becomes untrue in the new ideological climate. The Christian faith always speaks to us via a cultural medium, and some believers still manage to think and speak in, for example, a medieval cultural medium. Nowadays we have cultural a-synchronism at the synchronic level as well. That makes the current polarisation among Christians possible and explicable.

The mere idea of changes, even discontinuities in the formulation of basic Christian dogmas appears to raise suspicions of heresy and dissidence in some believers' minds. It suggests that all sorts of misconceptions about dogma and infallibility are current, not only among (Catholic and Protestant) Christians, but also, maybe especially in intellectual circles of whatever 'breed'. That is indeed the case. Consequently theologians have to disclose their assertive, critical assumptions if their exposition of familiar religious themes is not to be misunderstood. The Christian connotations of the term 'religious dogma' often end up in a haze of mystifications and distortions that surround it in the public domain. Elsewhere I have outlined how and why 'divine revelation' has a perfectly contingent, historical, human matrix, which means that whereas religious dogmas are indeed safe beacons that enable Christians to keep their lives on the right course, they are not meant to be static formulas that will always have exactly the same meaning and intelligible sense for historical and cultural human beings.[1]

I shall merely elucidate a few concepts: dogma, revelation and 'infallible truth'. Anyone who misuses these terms would have to brand virtually every theologian a heretic. And however deeply Christians take faithfulness to the gospel and its religious experiential tradition to heart, declaring someone a 'heretic', especially on the basis of mystification of a given ecclesiastic formulation, is fundamentally unchristian, not to say inhumane – that notwithstanding my acknowledgment that the official church has an undeniable supervisory or episcopal task when it comes to accurate phrasing of religious tenets.

[1] See chapter 5: 'Discontinuities in Christian dogmas' in this volume.

What is a dogma?

In Greek 'dogma' primarily means 'what passes as correct or true'. In a philosophical context it refers to an opinion, viewpoint or doctrine, as well as an edict or decree (e.g. Lk. 2:1: in the account of Jesus' birth it speaks of an imperial 'dogma' or decree to conduct a census; and in Ac 16:4 Luke says that Christians were told to observe 'the dogmata', i.e. decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem). Hence the word 'dogma' also implies some binding authority, and in church history that civil connotation was to play a cardinal role.

What has come to be known as dogma in the modern era, let's say since the 16th century Counter-Reformation, used to have a far more flexible meaning. The word 'dogma' was not even used for it. Well into the Middle Ages philosophical ideas, false conceptual systems, Christian religious notions and the like were simply called dogmata, concepts. In New Testament times what is meant by dogmas today referred to the Christian creed, and in the post-apostolic, patristic age they spoke of the apostolic kerygma or credos such as those adopted by the first great councils. In the Middle Ages – and Thomas in particular synthesised it brilliantly – they spoke of *articuli fidei*, articles of faith or 'articulated truths' in the sense of 'joints' that coordinate a cohesive body of beliefs, which had two aspects. Not all religious truths were called articles of faith, only those that formed part of the core message of Christianity and had a certain degree of complexity, whereas ordinary religious truths could be understood via and in terms of their subordinate relation to that message. The decisive factor was not some rule in canon law but a gradation of closer or more distant connection with God's self-revelation, in which he reveals human beings to themselves. Articles of faith are the cardinal religious truths that relate directly to God as humankind's joy and salvation, says Thomas.[2] Vatican II likewise, with some references to the medieval doctrine of *articulus fidei*, speaks of religious truths that are further from the core message – what one might call secondary and tertiary – and finally about non-revelational statements concerning ethical norms and values, truths that revolve around what it calls the core message of Jesus Christ's gospel. Vatican II expresses it in its doctrine of *hierarchia veritatum*:[3] religious truths are are hierarchically ordered.

All this clearly illustrates (on internal grounds) what is meant by basic dogmas. In the Christian tradition since the 16th and especially the 19th century dogma or dogmatic rules (albeit originally called by other names) came to acquire a highly formal, legal meaning. Dogma is a binding religious

[2] Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, a. 1 and a. 2, and especially a. 6.
[3] Decree on ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 11.

truth proclaimed by a competent ecclesiastic authority, irrespective of its fundamental, secondary or even tertiary status in the hierarchy of religious truths. That narrows the original meaning of the word in church history. The 19th century concept of dogma has two distinct dimensions: (1) correspondence of a given ecclesiastic pronouncement or article of faith with a revealed truth, hence one that is binding on believers on grounds of divine authority, and (2) the actual formulation of that truth, which is decreed, as it were, by the competent doctrinal authority; hence the expression, 'proclamation of a dogma'. A dogma is like a decree of the competent doctrinal authority regarding an article of faith. Thus there are two levels that differ greatly in value. They may not be identified with each other, since that would mean confusing creaturely, ephemeral and relative authority with uncreated divine authority. Dogmas are intrinsically polarised between an unassailable authority – God's – and relative, finite and fallible human authority. For even in their official capacity ecclesiastic authorities remain mortal and, by definition, fallible humans. Any infallibility of a dogma must necessarily derive from God's infallible revelation, which is, however, verbalised by human beings and church authorities. An articulation in human language can never be infallible and its concrete formulation refers in a purely human, hence relative way to the intrinsically all-encompassing, true and binding mystery of faith. Tarnished as it may be, sometimes even mutilated, a dogma nonetheless speaks revealed truth. It is this kernel of infallible truth and the human husk in which that truth is contained that constitute the believer's complex problem with dogma. For nobody can ever get hold of the infallible kernel per se – neither pope nor bishop, theologian nor 'ordinary' believer. It lies imbedded in finite human phraseology or expressions that always leave room for improvement. Hence the concept of dogma is marked by ambivalence. Nonetheless, however deficient, imperfect and inadequate the articulation, it conveys religious truth, which is something that emanates from God.

When laying down a solemn dogma the doctrinal authority always acknowledges the help of the Holy Spirit, and rightly so, as that Spirit is also active in the life and faith of God's people. What is often not mentioned, however, is that the Spirit's support is not automatically or magically activated, but passes through the free will, minds and experience of human authorities. Hence the gift of the Spirit is either positively communicated with the free collaboration of authorities endowed with God's grace, or negatively, distorted by unfaithfulness, intrigue and manipulation or negligence, culpable or otherwise, in which case the maimed formulation still discloses some truth. Historical instances actually indicate that, especially in cases where the help of the Holy Spirit is consciously and explicitly invoked, it is often an implicit concession that the rational arguments adduced, hence the unavoidable

'human transmission', are inadequate to convince believers (as in the case of the notorious section on contraception in the encyclical *Humanae vitae*, which is directly addressed to the priesthood).

But the same 19th century also saw a significant shift in people's – and believers' – conception of the problem. Since the time of the Tübinger school one hears about the evolution of dogma and there is keener awareness of the sometimes bizarre, even grotesque, development of dogma in the course of history. Since then all sorts of theories about dogma and the growth of tradition have been circulating.

In a general ecumenical sense (also among non-Catholic Christian churches) dogma refers to Christian religious doctrine inasmuch as it cannot be discarded, since it stems from God's word.

What is revelation?

Dogma presupposes divine revelation. But revelation does not come directly from heaven. It happens in the process of people's historical experience. Divine revelation manifests itself only in historical events: in an experiential and interpretive process, which is a actually a tentative learning process in the course of the ups and downs of human life on earth. Revelation is no less the work of searching, interpreting human beings than it is (by virtue of that fact) the work of God. As a result faith deals in absolutes, but never in an absolute way, hence only in a historical, relative manner that is open to correction and completion. Introducing a dilemma between so-called objective revelation and subjective religious experience, as some church leaders propose (in terms of an unrealistic, disastrous 'objectivism'), conflicts directly with the entire history of the origin of the Old and New Testaments. It is a false dilemma. Neither can exist without the other. And if revelation itself is a cherished but historically vulnerable phenomenon, never a 'possession', we need to be all the more cautious, and especially more modest, when speaking about the 'infallible' dogmas of the church.

The first question is: what does the doctrinal authority mean by infallibility?

What is ecclesiastic and so-called papal infallibility?

Vatican I

The first Vatican Council in 1870 declared *papal* infallibility a dogma. It specified dogmatically, as it were, when an official papal religious statement is a dogma.

In view of the many misconceptions about this I need to dwell on it. The official church has never claimed that the pope is *personally* infallible. We note that the councillors immediately scrapped the first title, 'De Romanorum Pontificum infallibilitate', and replaced it with the new one, 'De Romani

Pontificis infallibili magisterio'. That in itself is a trifle ambiguous, for the aim is clearly to explicate the pope's doctrinal authority insofar as it is infallible – a doctrinal authority does not always speak the truth! Hence what is infallible is not the person of the pontiff, only certain exceptional doctrinal pronouncements are free of error, and even then they are subject to weighty conditions that could be summarised thus: a pronouncement is infallible when the pope is addressing the entire church invoking his supreme authority (being the exercise of Peter's ministry and not, for example, in his capacity as patriarch of the West or bishop of Rome, which offices he holds in addition to the chair of Peter) and speaks ex cathedra, thereby expressing the infallible faith of the entire church in a particular, contemporary definition. In so doing he may feel himself 'temporarily' supported by the Holy Spirit throughout the process of careful formulation (as cardinal Guidi put it at the time).

The point is that the church's infallibility does not derive from papal infallibility. On the contrary: the pope's infallibility is inferred from the risen Christ's promise to his entire church that until the end of time (albeit with ups and downs} it will dwell in the truth, and the truth will dwell in it. That does not mean that all members of the church possess the 'charism of truth' in equal measure, but it does imply that the charism is present in the church. Certain papal acts in unity with the world episcopate, or those of the dispersed world episcopate in unity with the pope, are concretised in this ecclesiastic charism. That is the doctrine of Vatican I.

The problem, or rather the ambiguity of this statement by Vatican I is that literally at the last minute, at the insistence of cardinal Henry Edward Manning in particular, the already approved clause that such a solemn definition is *ex sese irreformabilis* (i.e. in and of itself irrevocable) was augmented with the clause, "*non autem ex consensu Ecclesiae*" (not on the basis of the consent of the church). The insertion could create the impression that the pope could solemnly proclaim a dogma on his own – which was certainly not the intention of the Council. After all, what was the position? The First Vatican Council was influenced by the aftermath of Gallicanism, which claimed that papal statements had no validity at all unless subsequently approved by the world episcopate. But from the context it is evident that for an ex cathedra papal pronouncement prior and concurrent consensus with the world episcopate, hence the *consensus fidelium* or *sensus fidei* (sense of faith) of the entire church, certainly was necessary, even imperative. The insertion that these dogmas are irrevocable 'not on the basis of the consent of the church' merely repudiates the claim that the world episcopate has to reaffirm the papal definition retrospectively. In other words, there is no papal *infallibilitas separata* in the sense of separate, independent and specifically papal infallibility. Papal infallibility is that of the church as a whole, which, through the pope's

consensus and unity with the world episcopate, and in harmony with the whole church's *sensus fidei,* is solemnly proclaimed. In the Council the Dominican cardinal Filippo Guidi made this point with great, all but dramatic vehemence. The pope cannot make infallible statements on his own, only with the assent of the world episcopate, which is how he comes to be endowed with the charism of infallibility to which *the church as a whole* can lay claim. Many councillors who opposed the minimalists and, even more fiercely, the maximalists explicitly refused to accept – as cardinal Guidi put it − that the pope could proclaim any dogma at his own discretion and purely in his own capacity, independently of the church.[4] But before the intervention Pius IX had berated him, especially because he received such backing from the assembly, and throughout the Council the pope put him under relentless pressure.

Mgr Felix Dupanloup's proposal to omit the ambiguous insertion, 'not on the basis of the consent of the church', was rejected. His alternative proposal was '*innixus testimonio Ecclesiae*', that is, the pope can only proclaim a dogma in consensus with the church.[5] In the hurried conclusion of the Council (following the outbreak of the Franco-German war) this did not really come across to the assembly; neither did the proposal of the 'infallibility maximalists', who wanted to impose the formulation that papal pronouncements are irrevocable *ex sese* and do not even require the church's *consensus antecedens, concomitans (et subsequens)* (prior, concurrent and retrospective assent).[6]

What the dogma of Vatican I boils down to is that there is no papal *infallibilitas separata.* A papal decision can only be an ex cathedra definition if it has prior and concurrent consensus of the entire church. Hence all that is rejected is the *consensus subsequens* or retrospective consensus in the sense of the Gallican demands.[7]

The problem is that in our century the memory of Gallicanism has faded completely, which makes the insertion by a few cardinals, via unedifying manoeuvres, of the 'not on the basis of the consent of the church' clause so ambiguous. For the entire historical report on the First Vatican Council by Mgr Vincentius Gasser makes it clear that the Council certainly considered the church's prior and concurrent consent essential for the pope to proclaim a dogma.[8] Finally, according to the Council the view that the such definitions are irrevocable *ex sese* does not mean that they are so by virtue of papal authority. *Ex sese* refers to the definitions themselves: they are infallible in their own right, since the pope is in duty bound to draw his dogmatic decrees from

[4] See extensive bibliography in the preceding chapter (5), 90, nt. 4.
[5] R. Aubert, *Vatican I* (Histoire des conciles oecuméniques, 12), Paris, 1964, 230.
[6] R. Aubert, ibid., 229-230
[7] See Mansi, vol. 52, col. 1024.
[8] Ibid., col. 1205-1221.

revelation and (to use a graphic expression) from the religious arsenal and potential of the church as a whole. He himself is subject to norms.

Viewed from the angle of the final texts and episcopal interventions, hence without regard to diplomatic and psychological pressure from above as well as the somewhat unedifying lobbying, the intention of Vatican I is clear and anything but sensational or shocking to anyone who studies it historically and substantively (even though that is only one side of the coin). True, the dogma proclaimed is marred by all sorts of ambiguities (as a result of subtle manipulation by a few 'infallibility maximalists') and is therefore open to improvement and correction, the more so because the broader context is not properly emphasised. Let me point out three ambiguities: the terms 'infallibility' and 'irrevocable', and the 'not on the basis of the consent of the church'.

Papal infallibiliy imbedded in the infallibility of the church: Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council adopted Vatican I's definition of infallibility almost verbatim, but put it in a broader context. That in itself obviated some ambiguities, but left others intact, thus missing an opportunity to put and end to all the mystery and magic surrounding what is known as 'papal infallibility'.

Firstly, the council only deals with papal infallibility in chapter III, after first dwelling on the 'mystery of the church' and 'the people of God' (who share Jesus Christ's prophetic task), in which the 'charism of truth' or 'infallibility' already features. According to chapter III papal infallibility follows from that, not the other way round: it concerns a papal and episcopal service to the church's 'infallible faith'; that, essentially, is its source!

A second improvement on Vatican I is that episcopal collegiality in the proclamation of a papal dogma is strongly accentuated. In proclaiming a dogma the pope is not speaking as a private individual. Each dogma also expresses the 'universal consensus' of the entire people of God (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 12). The council declares that the infallibility of the church – the entire church – also inheres in the college of bishops (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 22). This is followed by a much more refined view of infallibility than that of Vatican I. According to Vatican II the subject of infallibility is not the pope, but the college of bishops headed by the pope. Hence when defining dogma the pope has to act as head of the college of bishops. The fact that he sometimes defines a dogma on his own and on other occasions in conjunction with all the bishops (i.e. in a council) does not imply two acts by two different subjects. It concerns two procedural routes of the same subject. The only difference is the circumstance that in one case the 'one moral subject' (the college of bishops, including the pope) is dispersed all over the world, whereas in the other the

many members of the same moral subject are gathered in one place, namely a council. In the second case collaboration and consensus are manifested publicly and the personal presence of all parties allows more careful appraisal of the nuances in the definitions.

Hence it would be better not to speak of papal infallibility (the expression is elliptic and misleading) but rather of the infallibility of the world episcopate together with the pope as head of that college, and then only in regard to certain exceptional acts. Vatican II also puts the matter into an even broader perspective, although it did not work out the details, namely – and here we quote the theologian Ratzinger before he started his career as bishop and cardinal[9] – as follows: this view includes a moral commitment of the pope and the world episcopate to the voice of God's people. The pope and the bishops have to heed the voice of the entire community of believers before solemnly proclaiming a dogma. To that I would add: in order to embody it concretely special representative organs of God's people will have to be created. The text of the New Testament gives us a cue: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us…" Who are the 'us'? "The apostles and elders, with the whole church" (Acts 15:22,28).

Remaining problems after Vatican I and Vatican II

Finally, overall the Roman Catholic Church's position in regard to this dogma is a doctrine that might well be ecumenically acceptable and is by no means as mysterious or magical as popular comment would have it. The only thing is that the terms used – notably 'infallibility' and 'irrevocable' – remain impediments. Is 'infallible' really the obvious, apposite word for what is meant by the truth quality of a dogma? The word evokes all kinds of false associations. 'Inerrancy' (the term Protestant Christianity applies to the Bible), that is *freedom from error,* would be an improvement. But why not simply call a spade a spade by opting for the terms 'true' and 'truth'? A dogmatic tenet of faith is a truth given in Jesus Christ. After all, that is what one means to convey! A truth is true, neither more nor less. What does infallible add to that … except heightened pseudo-certainty? What difference is there between truth and infallible truth? The same applies to the term 'irrevocable' (*irreformabilis*). When one uses the term 'true' (in itself quite a presumption!) it immediately suggests (and a good thing too) that every dogma is open to improvement, that its meaning may change, et cetera. For we must not lose sight of Thomas's dictum: "*fides terminatur non ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem*",[10] that is to say, the act of faith really refers, by means of conceptual expressions (*enuntiabile*), to the matter in hand (*res*), the point at issue. The medium of culturally determined

[9] See *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche,* 'Vatikanum II', vol. I, 356.
[10] Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 1, a. 2 ad 2.

concepts does not make the *res* that the dogma is about subject to revision, only the way that dogma is phrased in human terms, images, concepts and judgments. While the words may be revocable, they remain an essential part of the dogmatic definition.

B. *Observation*: My theological thinking clearly displays not just smooth continuity but also fluctuating ups and downs, as well as forms of continuity that could only be achieved by way of discontinuities. If movement and continuity in the church's dogmatic thinking can also be achieved via discontinuity, this applies all the more to the thinking of individual believers or theologians.

The progression discernible in my thinking is mainly attributable to the diverse methods I have used over the years, in which an interdisciplinary approach to theological problems was a special concern. My personal studies started with an analysis of Thomas's conception of *sacra doctrina* (as theology was still commonly called in the Middle Ages). By *sacra doctrina* medieval people meant not only Holy Scripture but the entire Christian doctrinal tradition that lived by Scripture and even thought in scriptural terms. In this respect there were two schools in Thomas's day. The one accepted the terms '*sacra doctrina*', '*sacra pagina*' or even '*divina pagina*' as referring to the whole of Christian doctrine. Not just the Bible but the entire theological tradition expounding the biblical documents was called *sacra pagina* or *sacra doctrina*. The other school distinguished sharply between the Bible and post-biblical Christian tradition; it argued that the Bible is the basis of theology and the entire Christian tradition.[11] Thomas accepted both meanings. Since the very first phase of my theological thinking I saw theologising on the lines of the Thomist understanding of *sacra doctrina*: all scriptural and post-New Testament theology is a tradition that lives and thinks in terms of the Bible, and at the same time, in Thomas's scientific perspective, there is a clear distinction between Holy Scripture and post-biblical theology, as is evident in 'What is *sacra doctrina?*',[12] where he expounds the varying weight he attaches to arguments on the authority of Scripture and tradition.[13]

In the 1960s, when theologians started taking an interest in the human sciences, society, culture and ideology, including theology, came under scrutiny. While I critically followed this trend, my main interest was what I like to call the critical hermeneutic method in theology. I tackled the problem of textual interpretation because, in contrast to Protestant theology, hermeneutics was not widely known in Catholic circles at that time. The preferred term here

[11] The main proponent of this trend was Robertus van Melun, see: R. Martin, *Oeuvres de Robert de Melun; t.1: Quaestiones de Divina Pagina* (Spicilegium sacrum Lovaniense, fasc. 13), Louvain, 1932.
[12] Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 1.
[13] Ibid., q. 1, a. 8 ad 2.

was 'development of dogma and tradition', although the problem they grappled with went far deeper than the term 'dogmatic development' indicated.

Whereas at first I spoke of dogmatic development and later, more broadly, of the development of tradition, in the 1960s I adopted a hermeneutic approach to dogma. Since then I have studied to what extent structuralism, while not rendering the hermeneutic approach redundant, simply keeps it within certain more objective limits.[14] Structuralist textual analysis restricts the number of exegetical possibilities and thereby assures greater objectivity in the ensuing hermeneutics.

To my mind hermeneutics is not just the interpretive problem but also the science of interpretation that explores the assumptions of every exegesis. In the first chapter of volume three of my christological trilogy I condensed my lectures on the cognitive structure of human experience. There I refer to religious experiences in the Bible, but not in the sense of a 'theology of the word'. For what we call God's word in the Bible is the verbalisation of believers' account of their religious experience: the Bible contains the words of people who speak about God in terms of their faith. To put it bluntly, calling the Bible God's word is a metaphoric, even elliptic expression. The religious testimonies of biblical speakers can only be called the word of God indirectly.

Hence we must keep it in mind that to us the Bible is a human, historical and, as such, contingent *transmission*. People speak about God in faith, saying 'thus saith the Lord'. Speaking personally '*on behalf of*' God is misleading and dangerous.

All this is very pertinent to any theological study and understanding of the developments and discontinuities in the Christian experiential tradition. The so-called 'new theology' is misconstrued unless one realises that revelation is always communicated by historical human beings: what we call revelation is viewed from a particular perspective, hence cannot be treated as absolute. Treating such views as absolute I would call a form of fundamentalism. That is why I stress transmission via human, individual and collective religious experience in a religious community that speaks to us about God.

What is known as modernity (especially in philosophical circles) I analysed in a three-year course of lectures in the late 1970s. Actually they fell outside my systematic brief, but I needed them as a critique and to refine a systematic theology that would otherwise be far too simplistic. I studied what the

[14] The term 'structuralism' is used by quite a variety of linguistic schools, the common denominator being that they all base linguistics on the immanence of a text, hence what it actually says (*l'énoncé*) and its structure (its architecture, its independent internal elements), without regard to anything to do with its enunciation (of the *énoncé*) (the speaking or writing subject, the writer's or reader's situation). Hence structuralist studies of a text (in contrast to hermeneutic interpretations) contain no extra-textual references.

Germans call *das Moderne* from Nicolas of Cusa to Descartes, from Descartes via Leibniz and the Enlightenment to Immanuel Kant, and via Nietzsche and Karl Marx to assess what is true in the modern proclivity to subjectivity, a new and valuable development, and what it misleadingly conceals to the detriment of all religious faith. I saw this study as an extension of my earlier lectures, particularly those on religious consciousness generally, Christian consciousness and the distinctive identity of the Christian experiential tradition. Little if any of this has been published, but it affected all the books and articles I have written since 1980.

In what became known, albeit in diverse senses, as *postmodernism* all subjectivity has become suspect.[15] The scales seem to have tipped to the other extreme. The re-evangelisation-of-Europe movement launched by the pope tends to regard modern subjectivity as the great villain, but then finds the solution not in some form of postmodernism but in a pre-modern Christian model. That is the spiritual matrix of Europe; the entire modern era is seen as sheer decadence. Wherever modernity has made a positive contribution (e.g. democracy, human rights, freedom of religion and conscience) it is officially ascribed to fundamentally Christian values (even when the Roman Catholic Church fought it tooth and nail for a century). Pre-modern, agrarian, pre-critical Christianity is presented as the model of what true Christian faith should mean in modern or postmodern times as well.[16] This strikes me as a clear instance of poor hermeneutics in Christian religious proclamation.

There was also a period when I was much preoccupied with the analysis of what is meant by the 'secularisation process'. Secularisation is a reality but is interpreted diversely; it also has associations that have nothing to do with what may actually be called secularisation. Personally I see it as a socio-cultural phenomenon, which views the world and modern society in their own right in a rational cognitive framework, regardless of whether that entails rejection of faith in God or, conversely, assimilates the independent existence of this world into fervently theistic faith. In this sense secularisation is a positive good and *in itself* has nothing to do with religious decline (although that could be a concomitant). Thomas already said: don't immediately invoke God (as the 'first cause'), but first analyse things in their secular independence (i.e. as a network of profane or 'secondary' causes). That amounts to Christian recognition of the secularity of profane things. Before him all intra-worldly reality (as though there were a world outside the one we live in!) was under

[15] Some scholars clearly distinguish between three different, highly divergent, even contradictory trends in what is meant by the term 'postmodernism'; see K.J. Kuschel, *Lachen*, Freiburg, 1994, 70-72.

[16] See E. Schillebeeckx, 'Terugblik vanuit de tijd na Vatican II: De gebroken ideologieën van de moderniteit', in: *Tussen openheid en isolement: Het voorbeeld van de katholieke theologie in de negentiende eeuw* (E. Borgman & A. Van Harskamp, eds), Kampen, 1992, 153-172.

the direct control of the religious – 'therefore' ecclesiastic − power. Popes have actually claimed direct jurisdiction over all worldly affairs (Boniface VIII and his 'two swords' doctrine). The modern world, quite rightly, rebelled against that. The Roman Catholic Church's stubborn resistance to such legitimate secularisation from the time of the French revolution until the eve of Vatican II drove secularisation into an anti-religious corner and, in the circumstances naturally, into an anti-church position.

Eventually my writings were a result of, on the one hand, a planned personal theological project, and on the other, responsiveness to 'hot issues' in the world and the church, hence highly contextual. I have consistently distinguished between publications that resulted from some theological project of my own, and writings (both books and articles) prompted by the societal or ecclesiastic context in the form of direct responses to critical situations that arose in the Netherlands or in the world church.

Let me start with the latter. For many years (immediately after Vatican II and when I was younger) I left the priory I lived in virtually every Sunday to attend a eucharist in some randomly chosen rural or urban parish. This was primarily in order to share the liturgy with ordinary folk. My secondary motive was to *share the experience* of such a Sunday service by 'lay' people amid their day-to-day cares. This praxis probably influenced my theological ideas and questions more than I realised. Certainly it was a major source of such thinking, besides my cultural philosophy and theology textbooks, literature on history and our own times and – let me not forget – the radio programmes I always tuned in to when studying. I was often moved by the simplicity and authenticity of the Sunday services and the unaffected directness of the sermons. Only rarely did the superficiality of a sermon make me ask myself uneasily, 'how do believers put up with such inanity?'

At the University of Nijmegen, where I only had doctoral students, I was free to choose my own themes. In Louvain I had to repeat the entire curriculum of 'theological courses' every four years. In the 1960s, a period of protest action, students at Nijmegen legitimately demanded a say in the choice of themes for their classes. I made proposals, they came with their own, and between us we amicably arrived at a decision, in which all parties really got their own way. My eschatological, christological and hermeneutics classes were the outcome of my own project; virtually all other publications were in effect a follow-up on current events at the time, hence occasional and in that sense contextual. Nonetheless these publications were fruitful from the point of view of my self-chosen theological projects. My christological trilogy, on the other hand, was partly the outcome of my confrontation with the global christological crisis that started in the late 1960s. My publications on the problems surrounding the priesthood was part of my ecclesiological studies on

the one hand, and on the other inspired by the pastoral situation in the Netherlands and elsewhere.

2. LIVING BY THE GRACE OF GOD'S CREATIVE, LOVING CLOSENESS: CREATION AND GRACE

To me belief in creation is ultimately the foundation of all theology. At present theology faces demands from many quarters to deal with the doctrine of creation in its proper place. There has been so much talk about salvation history that a need has arisen to reconsider the doctrine of creation,[17] including the claim that 'creation from nothing' makes no sense at all. We need to find new words to meaningfully convey a religious tenet that does not seek to give a causal explanation for the world's existence. We know all about evolutionism, but the concept of creation leaves many people, including Christians, at a loss. As far back as my Louvain days I spoke in terms of participating in God, being in and of God, rather than in philosophical terms of 'creation from nothing' (is it really a philosophical concept, not an image?).

I regularly reverted to the topic right up to one of the last annual courses before my retirement. In that course I analysed the biblical creation story, compared it with its Assyro-Babylonian counterparts and even with African ones that were surely not influenced by creation myths current in the Near East, and also looked into the modern problem about the belief in creation. This was followed by a panoramic overview of the main concerns in patristic and medieval creation theology, especially that of Thomas; the modern concept of creation in the time of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel; and the concept of creation in the period following what was known as 'the death of God' theology. I concluded with an analysis of the concepts of contingence and 'nothingness' (*le néant)* in J.-P. Sartre's existentialism. What is the difference, not only in conceptual substance but especially experientially, between the 'communal' experience of contingence of a Christian, an agnostic and a militant atheist? How can a communal experience vary, at least inwardly? Agnostics concede that the experience is the same, then add that believers tag an unnecessary superstructure onto the same experience. As a believer I contest that. For in the one case the experience of contingence is 'empty' experience of a finite but, for that reason, completely enclosed inner chamber; in the second case it is by its very nature an experience of a silent (in that sense 'absent') but real presence of the living God. It is not some superstructure

[17] J. McKenzie, *A theology of the Old Testament*, New York, 1974. Clearly tongue in cheek, he nonetheless writes banteringly: "In a review I agreed with Franz Hesse that it is time to say goodbye to *Heilsgeschichte*" (Epilogue). It is, rightly, a passionate plea to give salvation history its place on the basis of a theology of creation.

added to a communal experience that is the same in every respect, but an inwardly differentiated human experience. This profound disparity is particularly difficult to articulate because of the presence, in the form of an absence, of a silent, nearby mystery.

While there is a difference between God and creature, the dividing line is on our side, not God's. It is our boundary. Ever since modern philosophy came to accept the experience of contingence without, as it once did, deifying humans but leaving them to their mortality, intelligent discussion between agnostics and theists has become possible.

Among theologians, too, there is growing interest in the belief in creation. For a while it receded from Christian experience, because God's unapproachable presence was sought too exclusively in the church, liturgy and sacraments rather than in the underlying experience: our being-in-the world, inwardly marked by finitude and contingence but nonetheless opening up a window on the invisible yet real, transcendent presence of that which, or he whom, we call God, a presence that manifests itself via the hollow side of our experience of contingence, in which God is experienced as an immanent omnipresence encompassing our existence: "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

The belief in creation is one reason for the success of the New Age movement. But I am opposed to one-sided interiorisation of human beings, since it leads to a new dualism, a dichotomy and discontinuity between inward and outward, which up to a point is a sheer abstraction. We only achieve inwardness via external or outward things; that is the nature of our body-mind unity which, although pointing to some polarity, does not extend to dualism. Interiorisation through blocking out the outside world strikes me as a false track; that way one never reaches true inwardness that is and remains human yet is still experienced as '*from God*'. The dichotomy between inwardness and outwardness is a modern phenomenon, which stems from Cartesian dualism far more than from Greek philosophy.

Unless we overcome dualism our interiorisation doesn't get us very far; we misrepresent the belief in creation and the role of Jesus as the Christ, hence as *concentrated* creation, is pushed aside. Such 'mystics' are out of their depth when it comes to Jesus of Nazareth, confessed as the Christ. Then something doesn't tally and a particular kind of inward experience of God's act of creation asserts itself – to the detriment of creation, of humankind and its history, and of christology. History as the medium of experience disappears. Without critical correction from the material world, the cosmos, any inward experience is under suspicion of fictionalising. It is purely subjective and could be imaginary. New Age is the acme of modern subjectivism, even though it also presents the unsettled debt of the Christian churches' exclusive fixation on

themselves, their liturgy and sacraments, and their legal control of churchgoers.

3. THE MYSTERY OF GOD

A. *Absolute freedom*

God's being as a constant surprise

God's being is absolute freedom, which is wholly gratuitous. Scholastic philosophy distinguishes between God's intrinsic 'nature' or being and his freedom in relation to the outside world (e.g. to create, redeem, punish, etc.). Thomas consistently maintains this distinction (Aristotelian in origin), whilst recognising that God's being and his acts are not separable. But his being contains nothing that contradicts his freedom (*libertas*). We only have finite freedom (what Thomas calls *liberum arbitrium*), including that of choosing between good and evil and various options: that is the nature of finite, hence limited freedom. Absolute freedom cannot be defined in such categories, for instance as if God at a given moment faced a choice of either creating or not. Freedom of choice is an attribute of finite freedom, which is essentially contingent: it could exist or not. Such contingency is foreign to divine or absolute freedom. God's being, which is absolute freedom, is eternally, hence inexhaustibly, 'constantly new' from our point of view (though we can only express it in finite human concepts). To us it is always sheer, unrepeated surprise.

For that reason God's being is wholly gratuitous and we can never prove his existence through rational argument. Nobody seeks to prove an existence that constantly confronts her. No scientist − whose business, after all, is to study existing, material reality – ever sees a need to prove the existence of the physical world. It is purely gratuitous. Yet there are those who say that the physical world is imaginary or humanly projected. The same applies to God's existence: to believers he is totally gratuitous, others call him a projection of the human mind. Yet humans are able to indicate both individual and common points or places where talk about God makes fairly intelligible sense and is evoked by and in these places. But by definition gratuity as such can never be rationally proved. Even a seasoned scientist has to admit it: human reason has its limits, even in the sciences. We can, however, demonstrate that it is rationally in order for people to talk about God and that such talk refers to something, to a reality.

Thomas's five so-called proofs of God's existence were meant to explain that what people call God can be a subject of rational discussion (although he obviously did so in terms of specifically medieval philosophy). That is why I speak of the gratuitous, absolute presence of God to the creaturely world.

Someone can be a close, healing and salvific presence and … nonetheless silent. That says a lot.

The hidden, silent God; atheism

God's presence is fundamental, especially when it comes to the prevalence of evil and excessive suffering in the world. It is not that God wills the suffering, but he remains silently by the sufferer's side. Even at the supreme moment when Jesus died on the cross God had not deserted him: he remained with him, silently. The believer knows, in the face of all appearances, that God is beneficently there.

That reveals something of the link between humanness and grace: to humans God's absolute, hence transcendent presence assumes the form of empirical absence, but by virtue of that brings wellbeing to those who believe – however mysteriously. We could scream at God in pain and incomprehension: 'Why? Why?' His silence is also a sign of his absolute, never demonstrable yet assuredly real presence.

Absolute presence manifests itself in 'empirically' silent absence. Naturally empiricists see this as a nonsensical inner contradiction. One can in fact shut oneself into the experiential sphere of contingence without experiencing a relationship with God. After all, one can experience his silence as non-existence. Atheism is a human possibility; living atheistically is a rational option. If one claims, as believers do, that God can remain silent, an atheistic worldview is feasible. One can never offer empirical, scientific proof of the existence of a silent, transcendent presence. But 'knowing', that is cognitive contact with reality, does not end with theoretical, empirical rationality or scientific method. It is a least equally rational to live life aesthetically or according to a particular praxis such as belief in God. Neither theism not atheism can be proven, both are forms of *faith* and a particular *attitude towards life*. All that differs is the substance. Both forms of faith are part of human, interpretive experience of reality. One person discovers the gratuitousness of God's living, absolute presence from experience of contingent reality; the same experience gives another person a sense of being locked into sheer contingency and finitude; finitude itself points to nothing and refers only to itself: *être et le néant*.

Because God's presence is absolute one cannot locate it in our world. He *encompasses* the entire creaturely world, of which he is not an element alongside other ingredients. Through his transcendence he is indwelling or immanent, hence is both Communication and Silence – thereby summoning us to interpretive understanding.

To the believer divine silence can be a source of prayer, but can also lead to a sense of emptiness, aridity and dark night. Then we accept the silent presence without losing ourselves in it. We can pray, losing ourselves in the

mystery out of sheer yearning for 'the Love' (*naar de Minne*) as the mystic Hadewijch writes in her poem. Apart from atheism, the silence can lead to diverse forms of prayer: from imprecation and lament to surrender and mystical union with the mystery of love that plays hide-and-seek with human beings.

Not just talk about God, but talk to a listening God

I have always been moved by something the Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila once said. She said that in order to pray properly she needed a picture, an image of 'our dear Lord' visibly on the table before her, otherwise she gets inwardly blocked. Certainly externals are ambivalent and can distract us, but they can also help us find genuine inwardness. Thomas likewise is known to have said, "Thinking about creatures the wrong way is to think wrongly about God and distracts us from him."[18] Exercises in interiorisation, including breathing exercises (however important), are not prayer in the Christian sense of the word. To Christians and all other monotheists (e.g. Jews and Muslims) prayer means presenting themselves before an unfathomable *mystery,* certainly, but one that they can speak to, and 'who' (in human terms) can speak and answer, a mystery who listens to us, looks at us and 'saw us before we were born'. And that is 'a moment of'' grace, reciprocity, *va-et-vient*, as when the Jew Jacob saw a ladder linking heaven and earth with an endless procession of angels, messengers ascending and descending it. It is not 'grace-less' self-redemption, even if the person is a hundred percent active. Still, prayer is what the Christian tradition calls *pati divina*, suffering God, what Master Eckhart calls *Gelassenheit*: letting God be God, as the supreme human activity.

To be sure, leaders of prophetic religions are usually mistrustful of mysticism. They tend to experience prayerful mystics as critical of their power politics. Yet all monotheistic, prophetic religions originate from and are nourished by mystical experience. In living contact with the mystery of goodness and mercy human indignation at what goes on in God's creation is the source and floodgate of a burgeoning 'utopia'. People are convinced that things must and can change. In Christianity, moreover, the accent is on the belief that the invisible God gives us a glimpse of his hidden face in the man Jesus of Nazareth, who in God's name showed special concern for those who were outcasts and marginalised in the creaturely world, and also called us people to care for our neighbour unconditionally, inviting us in our turn to care for every fellow human within our reach out of responsibility for future humans.

[18] Thomas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, II, 3.

Mysticism means living a God-centred life. But the living relic of God on this earth, which creates heaven and earth, is our living neighbour, whose face directs an urgent appeal to me, her neighbour. *There par excellence* – in a humbled, weeping human being – we meet God and our powerless attempts at prayer spontaneously acquire living, concrete, even potent shape. God-centred living is not a separate compartment isolated from other areas of life, to which only a privileged elite has access. It is a burning, exciting, hesitant and fascinated reaching out to people in distress – not a pious escape into inwardness, blind to the outside world of people who are mowed down like wild animals, even children and greybeards. I no longer believe in mysticism that goes blindfolded. My Christian faith in creation forbids that.

The concept of creation is essential to grasp salvation history – God's descent to humans groaning in pain and affliction (see Ex 3:7-8). The same concept is necessary to place the messianic appearance of the man Jesus of Nazareth in our creaturely world and our history and more especially to be able to welcome him there. The *human* 'self-respect' of the Flemish and Rhineland mystics in particular militates against a wholly inward mysticism cut off from history and the world. Rather have authentically human, humanistic horizontalism without any 'divine' transcendence if all the latter appears to be capable of and take pleasure in is to humiliate and belittle our humanness.

The interpersonal bond between human creatures and God is the life of grace: a theologal life oriented to God, concretised in salvific solidarity with humankind. Like Jacob's ladder, Jesus is a sort of centre of a busy traffic between heaven and earth, an ever ascending and descending lift between God and humans. Paltry images, but still! That way we Christians ourselves end up 'standing in the lift'; we become servants of God and other people, not as a separate sector of life but as a single, integral attitude, even if the mystical aspect of the whole has a unique identity just as the experience of Christian brotherhood and sisterhood has a distinctive identity. This polarity is one feature of the identity of the Christian religion.

Eastern religions also speak of a relationship with God, but not all of them refer to a 'revelation'. Often they find God only in personal inwardness, which as it were dissolves and merges into all-encompassing, ineffable mystery. Humans themselves in their innermost being are the source of the relationship with God, of salvation and redemption, while the Mystery nonetheless controls the entire process without any violence or domination.

At the same time the basic experience of Jesus is itself theocentric in all his deeds for the good of humans, especially wounded ones. His prophetism is fundamentally God-centred, not in the sense of being a *consequence* of his mysticism, but because he experienced God as a God-of-people, a *creative God,*

whose being coincides with caring for people and the whole of creation: to Christians God's very being is love of humankind. That is why salvation is not exclusively linked to Jesus himself, for the God he confessed was experienced by him as love of all people. God did not become that only with the coming of Jesus; that would have spelled the end of the value and meaning of all other world religions.

What it does imply is that from Jesus' preaching humanity appears to be one criterion of all true religion. If the actual content of a religion (rather than its adherents' unfaithfulness to the roots of their faith) wounds, violates, mutilates, even destroys people's creaturely and human dignity, we are dealing with an unacceptable religion. A religion that torments and humiliates people is by definition an improper way of worshipping God: it is unworthy of both God and humans. Either such a religion has lost its living contact with its roots and through its conduct distorts the authentic meaning of its original inspiration, or it is totally and radically unacceptable.

Holiness and prayer

According to Christian tradition holiness means doing God's will. But we have to look for it wherever there is goodness, and when believers feel that they have found it they may refer to it as God's will. It would be all too easy (and often unworthy) to say, just listen to the Bible or obey the church's doctrinal authority, then you're doing God's will. That could imply mockery of God's holy will and hence a violation of our humanity. Holiness means living by grace of God's benevolent and validating 'absolute closeness'; living in God's *accepted,* gratuitous presence; a life that, in the believer's acceptance of that presence, acquires an ethical, God-centred dimension also in relations with fellow humans. Holiness means God-centred,'theologal' living (in faith, hope and love) as well as proper ethics in the context of faith, albeit in the restricted, sometimes bodily or even mentally defiled and sullied form of the vicissitudes of the human condition.

To me prayer is the activation or 'surfacing' of a God-centred life of faith, hope and love, which therefore always has a mystical facet, not to be confused with what is called supplication or intercession. At the same time is cannot be divorced from these, otherwise one would debase the reality, the realism of our interpersonal relationship with God (rightly accentuated in all monotheistic religions). We must bear in mind, however, the immense difference between the nature of interpersonal question-and-answer relations and such God-centred relations between humans and God. To recognise the grace of God's listening presence is in itself a form of prayer, if not the very soul of all prayer.

Believers' prayers also have aspects of human interpretation of their faith. God's answer is not served on a platter. The 'answer' to a supplication, too, is

only experienced in prayer, so it remains an act of faith that is not empirically provable. I recall the response of the Flemish musician Lodewijk de Vocht, who on his way home from mass one Sunday bumped into an atheist friend. The friend chided him laughingly: "Lode, how can you with all your brains still believe that God exists!" To which this devout man replied, "*God doesn't exist? Why, I've just spoken to him in church!*" Certainly not a theological answer but a profoundly religious one, and for that reason *theologically apposite*.

Do supplications retain their validity in this view of prayer? For my part I would say certainly. Let's take the Our Father as an example. That does not appear to be a mystical prayer in any respect. It is a concatenation of human supplications. It asks that God's name be hallowed. It asks for the coming of God's kingdom. We entreat that his will be done, that our trespasses be forgiven and that we should not lack basic nourishment on any day. These are all supplications, requests we submit to God's freedom, but they all presuppose faith in God's absolute, gratuitous presence that brings humans joy and salvation. If God's being was not freedom but an exigency of his divine nature, such entreaties would be absurd. The prayer introducing the eucharist quite rightly enjoins us to make our concerns into a prayer.

B. *The holy trinity*

A diffident confession

We need to approach mystery hesitantly. Above all it concerns the one God, who manifests himself in creation with all its human cultures and religions, in all sorts of interpersonal relationships, and in a special way in the Hebrew people. Thereafter God manifests himself in the man Jesus of Nazareth as a kind of eschatological epiphany, which is why he is also called God's Son, expressing a crucial facet of the mystery of the trinity. Finally there is his manifestation, thanks to the risen Jesus yet through its immanence also transcending the Jesus figure, in the invisible but real activity of the Holy Spirit. But they are all the same God: the creator, the Father of Jesus the Son, and the Spirit of both Father and Son at work in the world and the church.

Christianity speaks of the triune God. But when it comes to defining the nature of the trinity more precisely, I – in contrast to most Christians, Catholic and Protestant, as well as Christian theologians from the Orthodox churches – tend to be reticent, certainly when it comes to specifying the 'three' in terms of three persons. For this purpose our human conception of a person is quite inadequate, being individualised and restrictive. I am wary of attempts to construct a speculative theology about three persons and their relations within a single divine mystery. Through Jesus, in his humanity referred to as God's Son in Scripture, there is a clear relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Christ, who after his resurrection offered us the eschatological charism of

the Spirit as a gift from the Father and himself. To me that is the sole legitimate premise, which I cannot get round if I want to say anything meaningful about the holy trinity.

So let me briefly outline some facets of my theology of the trinity, which I do not see as a separate treatise.

In the monotheistic traditions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – God's being is personal, personalistic. He is a God whom we can call on, to whom we can pray, whom we can address, who listens and reveals himself personally. But the distinctively *divine mode* of his personalistic 'nature' or being eludes us. Nonetheless his (humanly) total ineffable nature was expressed to some extent in his eschatological revelation in Jesus, whom people experienced, interpreted and confessed as the Christ, the Son of God. It means that in what Christians call God's manifestation (in one somewhat ponderous model even termed 'incarnation') in the man Jesus of Nazareth the distinctively divine mode of personhood is to some extent revealed. More specifically, that mode of personhood ìs not: less than personal, does not constitute 'three persons' (which patently betrays a kind of un-Christian yet Christian-folk tritheism or pantheon of three) but a trinity. God's divine personalistic nature in and of itself has a ternary structure. The trinity is the distinctive mode of God's personalistic nature.

We have only *known* the trinitarian structure of the divinely unitary, personal structure of God's being since the coming of the man Jesus, who is called God's messianic Son. But throughout the ages the divine mode of God's nature has been 'ternary', although the core of the dogma does not require us to think of three persons. That has never been formally affirmed (in the sense of consciously focused on the concept 'person' as such) in any general Christian ecumenical council – only that the distinctively divine mode of his personalistic nature or being is the ground and source of the holy trinity and has been so through the ages, not only since Jesus Christ's appearance in our history.

The trinity is sometimes represented as a family of three, as depicted in the famous, beautiful icon from 1410 in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moskow (Andrej Rubljov). But that does give rise to a form of tritheism, a pantheon of three and an abomination to Judaism and Islam. Neither do I see any salvific significance in investigating and portraying God's divinely personalistic being in the form of three separate persons that would tell me more about God than I already know and confess from my faith in Jesus Christ. Viewed from our angle trinitarian faith is implied in christology. Without Christ we cannot speculate on what the ternary structure of God's being entails independently of and apart from Jesus Christ, even though that structure is the ground and source of all christology.

Here a provisional, discreet *sigé* is warranted: a silence that calls for reverent gratitude and praise even now, but that will only be explicitly and cognitively recognised in the eschaton. That is why I do not concur with intra-trinitarian speculations, be they those (based on humanly preconceived models) of Augustine, Bonaventure or Thomas, or of Hegel and present-day theologians. Though I admire – indeed, share – their trinitarian piety, I flinch from the touch of human audacity when it comes to their trinitarian speculations. That is also why I have never written a treatise, *De Trinitate,* even though my reflections cover virtually everything else that can be explored theologically.

So I fully believe in the general Christian creed of the trinity, which through the ages has been *the same* as that revealed in our historical, earthly salvific order. And that belief has nothing to do with modalism – a theological doctrine of the trinity from the 2nd and 3rd century, which holds that the trinity is three manifestations of the non-ternary, 'unitary' structure of God's personalistic being.

I am not criticising so-called trinitarian speculations. The trinitarian thinking of Thomas Aquinas, like Augustine's, has taught me a lot, although mainly about the grammatical and semantic way we speak about God; I also learned a great deal about the immense inspirational force that faith in the trinity can exert on human thought. But do such speculations nourish our spirituality? Father de Petter, my philosophy professor and spiritual mentor, once asked himself: "What does the trinity tell me?" He believed in the trinity, even in the form of three actual *persons,* although he added that as a philosopher he could not grasp it at all. But as a believer he resolved the problem as follows: God communicates his innermost trinitarian secret to us even though we do not grasp it, and to me (said he) that offers a startling glimpse of his enormous trust in us. He entrusts a secret to us without telling us exactly what it entails; that remains a surprise for later on! I admired his piety and understood the 'psychology' of entrusting a very intimate mystery whose inner meaning will only be revealed later. Yet I discerned a paradox that left me unsatisfied, a solution to an embarrassment for a philosopher who wants to embrace the Christian faith.

At the same time my discreet hesitancy about the distinctively divine nature of the trinity is not because I flinch from the typically theological intention of the *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith looking for religious understanding), but expresses my religious and intellectual acknowledgment that in that quest *intellectus* puts a limit on *ratio*.

That does not detract from the fact that I unreservedly confess the trinitarian belief along with all praying believers, with 'holy diffidence'. I endorse the creed and confess it in prayer; it refers to the Father, Jesus the

Christ his Son, our Lord, and the Holy Spirit; but it should not be turned into a sort of family comprising three hypostasised persons. Through the ages God has been one and the same: Father, incarnated Word and indwelling Spirit, and in this ternary structure he is what the Greek patriarchs call *theos pros hèma*, God inclining to us – three 'perspectives', not to be identified more closely, on the one love that is God, who (to quote Irenaeus) embraces us 'with his two arms': word and Spirit. I believe in God the Father, origin of all that exists, creator of heaven and earth; I believe in Jesus the Christ, God's incarnate word; I believe in the Holy Spirit that consummates everything with divine love. And I make that confession in an ecclesiastic community, the church of the one triune, monotheistic God.

Humans, Jesus Christ, God

Humans are images of the triune God. That is a basic statement in the Christian experiential tradition. In the biblical context 'image of God' means that just as an image of the ruling sovereign was erected in all countries where he ruled in antiquity as a sign that he was lord and master, it should be clear wherever humans appear that God is 'lord and master': humans are images of God. Hence it is a task entrusted to people on earth to embody what God has in mind for the world: the establishment of a kingdom of righteousness and love, peace among all people and between all countries in a world created undivided by God. In that sense every human being is God's *vicar*; they – men and women – must prove historically that he is the Lord of creation and history. One could also say that where God rules people have a right to be human. Hence humans as images of God have nothing to do with a political theocracy, as some have propounded. God's kingdom on earth is *embodied*, however fragmentarily, by human beings as images of God. That is why anthropology and grace, and even soteriology, are intimately linked.

In that context I can say that to me Jesus is par excellence God's gratuitous gift, his gift to humankind and at the same time *the* human being, who in unique fashion offers praise and thanks for God's gratuitous gift of being God to human beings. After all, the New Testament calls Jesus Christ God's special image: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col 1:15). Just as the whole of creation is 'compacted' in Christ – creation compressed – so God's image is uniquely concentrated in the man Jesus. In their relationship with God, too, human beings are autonomous; Christians do not deny the human independence avowed by atheists. What is unique about Jesus Christ is that the man Jesus, however autonomous, is incomprehensible without a constitutive relationship with God – indeed, because of that unique independence he is inconceivable on his own, without God. Christians seek to express that by calling him the Son of God in a unique way. To us this means: "Put off the old nature with its practices and … put on the new nature, which

is being renewed in knowledge, *after the image of its creator*" (Col 3:9b). That is why Christ embodies the image of God in a uniquely potent manner: "…though he was in the form of God … [he took] the *form of a servant,* being born in the likeness of men" (Phl 2:6-7).

All this is part of 'my' image of God as discerned in the footmarks he left throughout our world, especially the footmarks left in our history by the man Jesus, even the invisible footmarks he left when he walked on water. God who gives himself *gratuitously,* God who speaks silently and disturbingly, God the great champion of human dignity and the freedom of God's children, *that* to me is the foundation of the spirituality that has its source in Jesus of Nazareth the Christ. Prophetic Christianity is a religion with mystical substance, but which also stands up for justice and love and advancement of our humanity. Involvement and protest, surrender and celebration are the four great pillars of the church to the extent that it is true to Jesus the Christ. God's being consists in promoting the good, combatting evil, even though in our history human wickedness means that all champions of goodness and *adversaries* of evil will have to walk the road to Calvary whenever they stand up for justice. Like the crucified one, they will experience surrender to the unfathomable 'why?' in their own lives.

Theologians' interest in human beings, in their natural and historical world, stems from God's own concern, because they try to *reach God himself*. God, however, is not directly observable in our world. We have access to God – the expression says as much – via humans as images of God, hence because our first point of access and encounter is human beings. God is not encountered anyhow. From our side his immediate presence is always via some medium. And human beings' basic question is that of the meaning of life, however defined, even if only by refusing to explain it meaningfully; even an absurd explanation is a way of answering the question. By the same token faith in living by the grace of God's ever abiding presence is a form of answer.

In the perspective of the interrelationship between human beings, Jesus and the Christian God one finally needs to consider the position of Mary, Jesus' mother, on the basis of historical and biblical data: the Judaeo-Palestinian girl Mariam of Nazareth. The Lucan Magnificat is particularly helpful in this respect. It seems God has an eye for the lowly: a shy, poor, obscure girl from Palestine, who set her heart on desperately awaiting God's salvation, however it may manifest itself: "I am the Lord's servant"; Mary is the epitome of Zion, the poetic symbol of Israel expectantly yearning for God's deliverance, a theological figure. In Mariology, therefore, I should like to increasingly demonstrate her relationship as a human being with God (and thus with the mystery of the trinity), remembering that, like every relationship between a person and God, it occurs via a *medium.* For the 'mother of God' that medium

lay uniquely in her maternal relationship with her son, the man Jesus, consumed as he was by fervour for the cause of humankind, being the cause of God, his Father. For her part, she "kept all these things in her heart" (Lk. 2:51b).

4. ESCHATOLOGY: LIFE BEYOND DEATH

Does death have the last word?

The *eschata* (the (four) 'last things') is in need of Christian reconsideration. After Vatican II H. Urs von Balthasar wrote about eschatology in theology: "Closed for reconstruction".

Humans are historical beings, trapped in history, and also want to make history. Being created by God, 'of God', they go through life 'with God'. But it can become a journey without, even against God. The relation of historical humans to an eternal God poses the problem of eschatology. Since human life is contingent, with a historical beginning and end, it inevitably raises the question: is my death the end of everything? Is there hope, a future beyond the boundary of death? Is there a heaven for good people? And a hell for those who go through life wickedly, lovelessly, full of hate?

The Christian experiential tradition worked out a perspective on these existential questions in the form of what is known as eschatology. The foundation of the Christian belief in eternal life is not a philosophical creed about the immortality of a spiritual soul within human beings, but their earthly covenant of grace or community with the eternal God, the believer's God-centred life in the sense of an interpersonal relationship with God, lived in service of others and for the good of future humans. Accordingly the real object of Christian faith in eternal life is not the spiritual immortality of the soul, but the resurrection of the entire person, down to its corporeality; expressed succinctly and elliptically, faith in the resurrection of the body.

Without any dualism a human being is still a mind-body duality, so achievement of our personal destiny does have a physical component. But from our earthly perspective we cannot concretely visualise what a glorified, 'heavenly' body looks like. At any rate it has nothing to do with the rising of a corpse or re-animation: resurrection is far rather the *visible radiance and bodily expression* of a perfect human person who has been assimilated into God. Thus faith in life beyond death concerns human beings in their mind-body duality.

What we call heaven and hell refers, firstly, to two anthropological possibilities. They are, moreover, asymmetrical: heaven and hell are not on the same level. Because humans – and human freedom – are finite, they are free to choose between good and evil. That is an anthropological fact implying a *possibility* that they will choose evil rather than good till the moment of their death. That choice is the human basis of what we call heaven and hell. Whether

there are people who, right up to the end, choose evil neither I nor anybody else knows. The actual realisation of that possibility is withheld from human judgment.

There is a further problem. A final choice of either good or evil in itself does not tell us anything about 'life' beyond death, eternal life. If, from a Christian point of view, the possibility of life beyond death is based on community with the living God here on earth, I ask myself whether those whose lives manifest no trace of such community can have eternal life beyond death. I don't know if there are such people whose deeds, especially towards others, totally repudiate love and justice, hence who reject God's love (at least implicitly). God alone can judge that. But I cannot deny the human possibility: I acknowledge that it is possible, but the reality we must leave to God's judgment. But if there are such evildoers and they die in that state, they have no grounds whatsoever for living beyond death. Then their death spells their disappearance from history, without any future whatever; to them it is also their 'second death' (Rv 20:6). They have no share in God's eschatological kingdom; nobody in that kingdom will even remember them. *If* such people exist! That also implies that ultimately there is only heaven without a demonic kingdom where the evil dead are tormented in hellfire till the end of time. That is insupportable, both 'divinely' (as we know God through Jesus) and humanly.

Even though Origen's notion of *apokatastasis* or *recapitulatio omnium* (none are damned; everyone goes to heaven) differs totally from what I propose, actually they converge, because in reality there probably are no such wholly evil people. My view differs from his in that I say we cannot humanly judge whether there are people who persist in their evil deeds until death and reject love altogether. So I leave the possibility of 'damnation' (i.e. the final death of evil people) open, whereas the doctrine of *apokatastasis* positively precludes it. Nonetheless, eschatologically there is only the kingdom of God. Life 'in hell' would mean being cut off from all contact with the world, fellow humans, God and oneself: that is the definition of nonexistence, the final, second death.

Some believers object to this view: 'then the evil they do would go unpunished!' Thoroughly evil people *must feel*, eternally, that they had done wrong, grievous wrong, on earth. To that the only answer is: then you have no conception of the indescribable existential joy of living eternally with God and all our loved ones, nor of what it means to be eternally cut off from community with God: to have no existence, end up in total oblivion, in nothingness. To be sure, then there is no longer any feeling, hence no sense of loss. God is not vengeful. Thus the eschaton, the final state of human beings, is wholly positive: life with God and fellow humans in a harmonious environment – even if we cannot picture it. But there is no 'negative' eschaton other than *absolute nothingness*, non-being. In the eschaton good and evil are not eternally

juxtaposed: good has the last, ultimately the only word. Just as evil is not more 'original' than good (hence is not a *proton*), so evil is not an eschaton: it is not eternal – even though I do not presume to claim that evil, the non-eschaton, will be accomplished in the form of an *apokatastasis* or second death of all evil. There are also theologians who maintain that eternal life is simply the earthly life of people living in community with the eternal God (whether consciously or unconsciously). At death one finally returns to God's bosom without any personal afterlife. According to these theologians personal existence ends at death. That begs the question whether good and evil merge into God's bosom in the same manner! In that sense they are still speaking about immortality and life beyond death. Personally I think that this is an abuse of language, including metaphoric language, and that talk about eternal life becomes farcical. To say that the life of the righteous ends in divine anonymity strikes me as counter to the Christian experiential tradition.

Other theologians are more consistent in that they recognise that such talk of eternal life is farcical; they are more consistent and simply deny that human life continues beyond death.

In both cases the belief changes qualitatively if one accepts earthly community in God's grace as the core of Christendom (as Jacques Pohier puts it). For to my mind this living community with God is fundamental to *justified* faith in and hope of eternal life. Even though these theologians do not acknowledge the inner implication of what they affirm (viz. community in God's grace), I can still accept them as fully Christian, despite their explicit denial of real 'eternal life' (or at least their incorrect use of the term); the fact is, religious truths are hierarchical. Eternal life really is God's gratuitous bonus for 'righteous people' who believe in his grace.

One can only criticise the critics' philosophical and depth-psychological reductions (e.g. in the case of J. Pohier) that reduce faith in eternal life to an infantile human longing for continuing existence as a form of human megalomania. I maintain that as mortal beings we have no claim to eternal life and, from a purely human point of view, earthly life and eternal life are actually contradictory. From a Christian point of view eternal life does not mean the immortality of the soul – it is a gift from a merciful God who remains true to his love and does not abandon the righteous at death. Eternal life as an inner implication of community in God's grace is not *logically cogent,* but – so the Christian experiential tradition *hopes* – an implication of God's gracious will, which we cannot logically infer from our earthly community with him. But without the resurrection, Paul reminds us, our faith is vain and pointless.

Although every affirmation of faith is made, as it were, in fear of God because the *docta ignorantia* in faith is always greater than what we believers

purport to define and articulate, as believers we also cannot hide behind a sometimes far too comfortable 'negative theology'...

And then … purgatory!

The council of Florence-Ferrara made some clear pronouncements on purgatory. In my view the concept is essential for eschatology, but it needs to be stripped of all the images clinging to it in popular imagination, which persisted right up to the council of Florence.

Even if people choose goodness and die in community with God, they are not 'saints'. They are flawed. Though fundamentally reconciled with God, they remain marred by sin and are full of imperfections. Ultimately purgatory is an image of a religious reality that can be experienced by human beings. On their first heavenly encounter with the living, holy God, the first act of reciprocal love for the human person confronted with a welcoming; God (I am speaking very anthropomorphically, but that is unavoidable) is a kind of purging, a catharsis. The act of love in the form of the redeemed human's gratitude to and praise of God is so intense that it burns away, so to speak, all flaws and imperfections; hence the image of purgatory as a fire (e.g. in Dutch and German religious terminology). This affirmation is grounded in real-life experience: burning love makes us better people, it purges what was wrong in our attitude to life. If we call the heavenly encounter with God a 'beatific vision', one can certainly call the first 'moment' of experiencing God's heavenly love by a deceased person, who has been fundamentally justified by grace, a consuming catharsis of love that burns away all imperfections. That is what tradition calls 'purgatory', which is therefore not a place where a person is tormented for some time because of inadequate atonement for sin (again the notion of retribution and punishment!), but – here the image makes a point – the burning love of an as yet imperfect being who 'sees' God for the first time and thus reaches 'perfect repentance' that permanently blots out the misguided past.

The so-called fable of the lost earthly paradise

I still need to say something about the 'earthly paradise'. The image refers to both the beginning of creation and the eventual heavenly paradise. An image is only authentic if it is not identified with reality, hence is not reified but is allowed to point beyond itself. And if it is to be effectual, it has to refer to something.

The Old Testament speaks about the end-time or eschatology with reference to 'in the beginning'. That is to say, reflection on the eschaton antedates reflection on the genesis, and the story of Genesis is modelled on prophetic stories about God's future for humankind that were current at the time. On the basis of a prophetic vision of the eschaton people construed a picture of the

genesis of history or *protology* (doctrine of the *proton* or 'first things'). God originally put humans in a perfect 'earthly paradise', but they sinned: they were driven from paradise and had to perform their human toil in the sweat of their brows. God himself would save them and restore them to an eschatological paradise for ever: there would be no more tears, suffering, sin.

This was interpreted variously, even in the early church. Especially the Latin fathers (since Augustine) saw creation after the fall of the first human couple as subject to sin that would doom all future generations to a sinful state. Originally created pristine by God, they were perfect, mystical and ethically good (state of earthly paradise). These paradisal humans are described in Genesis in terms of images that the prophets used to depict God's coming kingdom: children and wild beasts living together in amity, a child playing near a nest of adders that do not harm it. That's how it was in the earthly paradise. Hence protology should be read as God's future kingdom mirrored retrospectively in the beginnings of the human race. In other words, protology and eschatology depict Israel's dream of true humanity.

That happened against a background of frustrating, tragic events. For the 'ideal' humans Adam and Eve – the supreme mystics, the holy human couple – nonetheless fell from grace and have been wandering sinfully outside paradise ever since, in need of salvation. Sin accumulated over the generations. One of the first two sons already committed fratricide. It snowballed. Eventually God wanted to halt this calamitous history by having the majority of humankind die in a massive global flood: the deluge (historical memories of regular floods in the Tigris-Euphrates valley were harnessed to compile 'sacred history'). Noah and his kin, accompanied by a pair of each animal species, were saved; the covenant with God was renewed. A new history of humankind commenced. But post-Noahan history brought little that was new or different: humans proved to be incorrigibly human.

Greek patristics has a very different myth that (as it happens) comes closer to modern notions about human prehistory. Especially after Irenaeus the original humans were not seen as holy, perfect beings that came to a fall. On the contrary: humans started off humble and imperfect and gradually – with ups and downs − grew to true humanity, although personal sin would constantly bedevil the search for it. Here paradise is exclusively *future,* not an eventual *return to* the perfection of the original paradisal humans.

Parousia (Jesus' return): a concept from the world of science fiction?

Some months ago I had the following experience. I was walking down a street in a big city and behind me (and the rest of the crowd) a man was handing out a flier, calling intermittently: "Jesus is coming." I joined the people behind him to see the reactions of the oncoming traffic. Every now and again he would shout: "Jesus is the Son of God." But mostly it was, "Jesus is coming soon."

Only once it was "Jesus is your saviour." People hardly looked at him and, fondling their long shopping lists, indifferently went their way. Irrespective of the way the 'advertising' was done, I asked myself: what do present-day Christians think when they hear that Jesus will return? They appear to carry on unthinkingly.

Does it mean we should simply scrap Jesus' return from our Bible, more especially from our religious consciousness?

Traditionally the story of paradise formed part of the story of creation, the fall and redemption. But is it an account of three chronological phases in creaturely reality? It is not. It is about three qualifications of human life. And, learning from these stories, Israel and the Christian churches confess the following: (1) the world and the human beings in it are 'of God'; (2) the human world is warped by manifold forms of sin and unnecessary suffering; and (3) they are continually visited by God's saving presence: there is forgiveness and salvation for sinners.

There is something like 'the sins of the world', as the Bible puts it. Even the structures of the world made by humans – albeit not wholly intended that way – betray the mutilation of human sin. When we enter the world sin has already made history, just as the good done by people before us has made history. It is a sinful situation that antedates the will of individual freedom. Our entire history, notwithstanding a lot of goodness, moves from one sin to the next. The very society into which we are born is in a state of sin. Even before we start contemplating a free act we are placed in a situation that, willy-nilly, prompts − albeit not coerces − us to sin. The external sinful situation also becomes an inward state: we have already soaked up sin, as it were, stored it in our inner being and lodged it there, simply by living in a world, an environment that can no longer be called whole and unblemished. That is the crux of the dogma.

But when the Council of Trent had to render this inner state intelligibly in words it did not have the benefit of this modern, conceptually comprehensible instrumentation. Like Augustine, Thomas and others, it saw no other way of expressing it at the time than to proclaim a dogma that, through procreation, the personal sin of the so-called first human couple was inherited by all the descendants of 'Adam and Eve', so that all humans enter the world with a defiled soul (*macula animae*). Hence the term that may well strike us as absurd, 'original sin' (in Dutch and German 'inherited sin', as though sin could be inherited). But what it seeks to convey, however much distorted by the image, is an inarguable human reality!

As regards the question in the section heading, Jesus' parousia, I would answer as follows. I want to emphasise – more than I have done so far – the significance for salvation history of what the New Testament calls the return of Jesus, the Son man.

What I have said about heaven, hell and purgatory is still partly confined to what one might call particular judgment, which does not concern human history as a whole but only the individual's personal role in it. But Scripture unambiguously refers to a final judgment of all history, which implies more than the prospect of human life beyond death. "He will come again to judge both the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end," says the creed. The consummation of God's kingdom, the universal resurrection and the inauguration of a new heaven and a new earth are preceded by the judgment of the Son of man, the judge of our history.

That is a crucial scriptural statement. In earlier articles and books I have spoken about the three great eschatological metaphors: kingdom of God, resurrection of the body, and a new heaven and a new earth; but since 1989 I have added a necessary fourth metaphor to the list: the parousia and the *Maranatha* prayer.[19] Here the concern is not so much with retribution or forgiveness for what everyone in history has done, but with judgment of the world, a final judgment of human history as such. God delegated this final judgment to the Son of man, Jesus Christ, the witness of God-is-righteous, as summarised in the Letter to the Hebrews and implied in the data of the Apocalypse.[20] This final judgment by Jesus the Son of man is what makes the uniqueness of Jesus Christ universally clear: Jesus brings justice for all those who were marginalised in our history. Jesus himself, the outcast on the cross, will give the outcasts of human history their due.

Hence the parousia has everything to do with the substance of the kingdom of God, the universal resurrection, and the new heaven and the new earth. *Maranatha* refers to the eschatological key event, which permits and inaugurates three other eschatological metaphors. God's goodness actually has the very last word: the parousia of Jesus Christ is the revelation of the eschatological vision, what God's creation will look like as a new heaven and a new earth after the final judgment by the Son of man.

5. ETHICS AND RELIGION

Is ethics autonomous?

The apostle Paul says that we must experience human ethics 'in the Lord'. This implies that ethics is primarily a profane human affair, in which Christians must assimilate behavioural norms objectively founded in human dignity into their God-centred religious life. Ethics in itself is humanly autonomous and not specifically Christian. In Paul's teaching it is evident that when he speaks, for

[19] Especially in: *Church: The human story of God*, New York, 1990, 134f..

[20] See my exposition in: *Christ: The experience of Jesus as Lord*, New York, 1980, 432-462, esp. 433f., 461f; the quotation in the text, 'Christ, the witness of God-is-righteous', is the title of II/II, chapter 6 of this work, which summarises Schillebeeckx's reconstruction of the data in the Apocalypse (ed.).

example, about the ethical norms that should govern marriage he is simply referring to those of the Stoics, which were commonly applicable in his day. All that Paul adds is that humans must experience marital ethics 'in the Lord', hence as Christians. Everyone – Christians and non-Christians, believers and agnostics – are looking for ethical norms for a decent life, not randomly but in earnest pursuit of what may, can and must be considered worthy here and now.

It should be noted that in the course of history Christians were not always the first to recognise situations of injustice and ethical evil and to advocate proper ethical laws and norms to correct these. Take the case of slavery. Christians were often the last to defend it when 'humankind' had long realised that slavery was ethically indefensible (even though that ethical realisation only dawned, outside Christianity as well, once a change in the economic system had actually rendered it redundant!). Paul saw this to mean that Christians should abolish the unequal rights of 'freemen' and 'slaves' (essential components of the economic system in antiquity) *within* the church: here there must be no distinction between master and slave. But he did not conclude that in civil human relations, too, such subordination was intrinsically evil. The Christian churches took centuries to see the implication, whereas civil society had fathomed its unethical character some time earlier.

Human ethics is not *directly* based on God, but on humanity or human dignity. For that reason Christianity must be extremely humble and not annex ethical norms as specifically Christian property. There is, however, an interrelationship between humanly autonomous ethics and the Christian religious context into which this human ethics is assimilated. Hence in principle Christians have to cultivate even greater sensitivity to what human dignity requires here and now. But history shows us that the church often failed in this respect, especially when it came to 'macro' (in effect socio-political) ethics, whereas in 'micro' ethics (sexuality, marriage, etc.) it remained bogged down in outdated, agrarian, pre-critical categories and, more is the pity, considered these categories specifically Christian, to the alarm of those who, out of human concern, looked for real human dignity, also in regard to sexuality and marriage.

Christians must not invert relations and say, 'that is God's will, so we must conform to it'. It is the other way round: what human dignity humans discover here and now, and always discover afresh in conscience and good faith, may be experienced by Christians as God's will. For the *direct* basis of ethics is human dignity, not God. Besides, faith in God does not add anything to human dignity, which, because humans are his creatures, has its *ultimate* basis in God. Hence human dignity and God's will cannot be aggregated. Only experience of what constitutes human dignity can reveal to Christians what

they may call God's will here and now. If not, they proclaim an ideology by disregarding a fundamental principle of faith and theology, namely that of human and historical *mediation* in all our relations with the living God.

Ethics, integrated with a religious context

No religion can be reduced to ethics. All the same, faith and morals or ethics are intimately linked. Christians view autonomous human morality in the context of praxis in accordance with God's kingdom, to which insight hopefully they contributed along with other people. The Christian spirituality of ethics – which in itself is not specifically Christian but universally human (although universal humanity obviously displays considerable 'a-synchronicity' because of diverse historical conditions) – is at the level of God-centred living, that is a relationship of faith, hope and love. The danger is that the more we disregard the relationship with God, the more readily we succumb to idolatry, thus subordinating the ethical requirement of human dignity to idols like power, money, sex and the like. But God is not compatible with idolatry. In that sense authentic faith in God is highly pertinent to ethics. He is a jealous God, who opposes idols but never true human wellbeing and dignity.

When it comes to an ethical issue like homosexuality, for example, there is no specifically Christian ethic, even though some aver the contrary. It is a human reality that should be approached in terms of human dignity and human ethical norms. Recently the American bishops quite rightly objected to a letter on homosexuality by cardinal J. Ratzinger. His letter conflicted (on various points) with all sound scientific knowledge. To invoke the Bible in order to condemn homosexuality is hermeneutically unsound. It overlooks the fact that the biblical text is a socio-cultural product, expressing authentic religious experiences as well as a particular historically conditioned culture, which its authors shared. The Bible, apart from what believers may find in it, is ancient literature, not an eternal revelation of supra-cultural truths.

Believers who overlook that enter a danger zone of hurtful discrimination.

Ethical relations with others is the human scene where God reveals his presence

Concrete human ethics is not only autonomous, neither is it included in an existing God-centred relationship. It is more complicated: in a veiled manner God's real revelation speaks unambiguously in ethical relations with 'the other', our fellow beings and humankind as a whole. I raised this problem earlier, when I dealt with the mystery of God. Here I merely touch on it, because the exposition of this relationship will be the main theme of chapter 1 of a book on the sacraments that I hope to publish. There I shall react, on the one hand, to an unrealistic portrayal of God's transcendence, and on the other to a naïve, outdated picture of his overly close presence. Both these biases

pervert the meaning of all liturgical worship: it is either rendered impossible or becomes a magical manipulation of his presence. Sacramental worship and praise of God are meaningless unless our actual humanity, especially our ethical relations that summon us to practise loving justice towards other people, is the human setting where divine revelation is possible and is actualised in righteous conduct. That is crucial for grasping the right relation between so-called profane, solidary sharing of bread with everybody and the metaphoric act of breaking the eucharistic bread. But a proper analysis of this theme is reserved for my book and I do not want to divulge it yet.

6. SOME CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS IN THE CHURCH

Offices in the community of the church

I in no way object to the church's institutional aspects. We can't do without them. But concretely these institutional elements evolved historically in accordance with the pastoral needs of the religious community as well as church leaders' sensitivity to these needs, for in this respect church leaders can be either conducive or inhibitory factors. In the post-Pauline letters one observes that the clerical offices that were there from the outset developed according to a uniform pattern and the *presbyteroi* (not yet known as priests) came to dominate the 'prophets', who, along with the apostles, had been the cornerstones of the early church (Eph. 2:20). Even though in New Testament times this body of presbyters had a rotating chairman, called 'overseer' or 'supervisor' (*episcopus*), it was not until the latter half of the 2nd century that the system grew into one with a presiding presbyter, now called bishop or *sacerdos* (substantially in the sense that the term still has today), with a throng of *priests* surrounding him. That was also when the word 'presbyter' became 'priest'. In addition the old ministry of deacons continued. Classically, then, we have a triad: bishop, priest and deacon. This was the sociologically matured fruit of a historical process of pastoral policy, to some extent influenced by the civil political structure at the time, comprising provinces, cities and capital cities (metropolises).

Several fathers at the Council of Trent proposed calling this clerical triad a divine institution (*divina institutio*). The council turned down this unhistorical notion: the historical evolution of clerical offices into a triad comprising episcopate, presbyterate and diaconate was not directly instituted by God but could be regarded as a divine order (*dispositione divina*): it fell within the ambit of divine providence. Vatican II found even this watered down version too much and the Tridentine formula was diluted still further to *ab antiquo* (traditionally), that is to say, the venerable antiquity of the trichotomy does not make it historically immutable.

In reality the structure of ecclesiastic authority evolved according to sociological rules, in which one can and may discern (albeit with due humility, for there is still the possibly problematic but inevitable human mediation!) God's good leadership in church events. But one cannot, on the strength of past events, pin down the Holy Spirit to structures that have evolved historically in one way or another in light of the pastoral and ecclesiastic needs and church policy at that time.

There are various offices in the church. In their diversity they have evolved historically and as such are not a dogmatic must. Actually, when it comes to sacraments, nothing is dogmatically fixed for all time. There is, however, a church order that regulates historical development. In principle such regulation is done according to the pastoral needs of church communities here and now. If the church order in fact serves and meets pastoral needs, we ensure historically that believers and their clergy adhere to that order and do not disregard it as they please. But if it is not just some maverick officially playing around with the church order but genuine dissatisfaction with the prevailing order among clergy and laity in local communities, we conclude, historically, that in fact there is something amiss. Thus we find that in instances where church leaders obstinately cling to an order that once accorded perfectly with Christians' pastoral needs and requirements but are at odds with those of present-day believers, Christian people and their clergy, spontaneously as it were, contravene the prevailing order, because they feel that its function is to serve and regulate the community, not the other way round.

Where our time-honoured church order conflicts with emerging needs and new ideas about human relations the principle all of a sudden appears to be that humans are there for the sabbath! That is to stand the gospel on its head. The sabbath is there for human beings, not the other way round. In such cases the outdated church order is enforced even more strictly, to the great frustration of believers. That is the situation of the church in our day, in both West and East, North and South.

In the Netherlands this is evident in the unhelpful comment, "The pastoral workers are doing an excellent job, but *after all they are only lay people*." From this follows the astonishing conclusion that if their deathbed counselling, for example, extends to extreme unction, it would serve no sacramental purpose! It is like working on a computer: if one does not key in the function correctly, nothing happens however much we moan and groan. Such people have a computer conception of the operation of sacraments. Thus we perpetrate all manner of ecclesiological reductions in church life, whereas pastoral workers are the ones accused of doing that.

It is not the intention of believers to abolish, for example, the existing trichotomy of ecclesiastic offices; there is absolutely no pastoral need to do so.

What we have to consider is whether the ministry should not become more differentiated and be redefined in view of the church's situation at the end of the 20th century on the eve of the third millennium, and whether these ministries should not be regarded as full-fledged offices.

Another pressing problem concerns the papacy, from both a Catholic and an ecumenical point of view.

In the apostolic college the office of Peter – according to the tradition of the Matthean church, traces of which are discernible in virtually all other early Christian traditions – has special significance, albeit in conjunction with the entire college of apostles (what is said to Peter alone in Mt. 16:19 is addressed to all disciples of Jesus in Mt. 18:18). But this scriptural datum does not tell us how the Petrine function should be fulfilled in practice. Can that ministry be exercised by a triumvirate? A synod? Or is it tied to an individual office bearer? From a purely dogmatic point of view these are all open questions, which can only be meaningfully answered in terms of the concrete pastoral needs of actual church communities, not from some ivory tower, be it that of theologians or of the Roman curia. The existence of an ecclesiastic 'hierarchy' merely means that there is authority, including differentiated authority, but not that everything has to come 'from above', as people tend to interpret the church's hierarchical structure. As though democratic exercise of authority would reduce it! By democratic exercise of authority I mean that what concerns everybody in the church should be open to discussion by and with everybody. That is a policy principle from the early church.

According to a historical analysis by the Benedictine Don B. Botte prior to Vatican II, ecclesiastic governance by the college of bishops of the entire church dates back to ancient church custom. But in the era of absolute monarchies the Petrine function also developed into an absolute monarchic one, whose last convulsion may be found in the *Nota praevia,* a non-conciliar document of Vatican II that was imposed on the assembly 'from above' in authoritarian fashion without permitting plenary discussion. In the Netherlands that became known as the 'black week' of the Second Vatican Council, after which some eminent Catholic intellectuals emphatically bade their church farewell. Authority in the church is necessary, but authoritarianism and blind obedience are evil, un-evangelical and unworthy of the church: it disrupts the unity of the church.

Originally the church was God's eschatological community. But historical time continued after the death of Jesus of Nazareth who had gathered this community around him, and consequently the message, along with the praxis of God's kingdom, was proclaimed by the church of Christ. Thus the church and ecclesiology were born of an eschatological vision the moment it was realised that Jesus' death was not the end of our historical world, as

apocalyptic Christianity (probably Jesus as well) had thought, but that for now the course of history continued. The origin of the church is essentially bound up with Jesus' message and praxis of God's kingdom, which had to be proclaimed as long as the earthly historical order lasted. The early church was aware, moreover, that in the process it would be supported until the end of time by the glorified Lord and the Spirit, the mother of the community of believers (see Mt. 28:19c; 16:18b).

The institutional dimension of the church exists as a service or official 'ministry' to safeguard the freedom of God's children and hence to curb all wilful anarchy, but not to oppress and humiliate them. The episcopate also has the official task (which all Christians have unofficially by virtue of their baptism) to uphold Jesus Christ's message in its integrity but without violating Christians' humanity and subordinating their wellbeing and salvation to the law, including canon law. When the church adopts the attitude of a servant it becomes plausible and the admonitions of its leaders are listened to sympathetically. One might (as a counter question to pope John Paul II's words during an official visit to France, "France, what have you done with your baptism?") ask the official church humbly and respectfully: "Church, what have you done with your baptism of fire in Christ ?" Would that be Christian hubris?

The present-day church (which includes me) is sinning by omission. The church of God in Jesus Christ has many opportunities in the world, more than ever before. The current world situation itself is a *kairos* to Christians, a God-given opportunity of grace. But many Christians feel that their church leaders don't understand them. Of course, a measure of suffering for the sake and at the hands of the church is part of every Christian's lot. That applies universally: commitment to a cause often causes friction between those involved in the work. But then that same church cannot use the inevitability of such suffering to bolster its (denounced) leadership by *hierarchically* insisting on obedient *mystical surrender.* That is truly to abuse the holy gospel.

Hence I prefer (as a legitimate accent in our age – every age is entitled to its own accents) a low-key ecclesiology. After all, our modern 'secularised' world is not less religious; turning one's back on *the institutional church* in faith is to some extent rooted in religion. All too often the institutional church comes across as implausible. Even the Second Vatican Council centred on the church, not on God, human beings and their relationship with God, even though the latter form the background to all talk about the church.

Voluntary celibacy versus mandatory celibacy linked to holy orders

This issue is a source of concern to a growing number of bishops. Some cardinals and bishops are calling for a revision of the Latin church order in this respect. But the pope and his curia stubbornly refuse to look into it. Nobody is

opposed to celibacy as such. If it is a humanly meaningful option, it can be experienced 'in the Lord' – for the sake of God's kingdom, one would call it, and rightly. But then it should be a free option, not mandatorily tied to a vocation, for instance to clerical office, which on the one hand is called a 'divine calling', while on the other that calling is linked to an ecclesiastic law, namely celibacy. How does one reconcile the two? Is God bound by church laws? Should those laws not rather be directed to what the church terms a divine calling? Here the church does not facilitate the divine call but introduces an *obstacle*.

Of course the church may and should set conditions for candidates to ensure that they will be worthy ministers of the holy mysteries. But is Christian marriage an impediment to proper exercise of an ecclesiastic office? Does that make married clergy in non-Latin churches and the many married priests from other Christian denominations that join Roman Catholic churches and are welcomed with open arms second-rate priests? Sociological studies have shown that married clergy in other Christian churches are often more available to their flock than their celibate brethren, who as side-effects of mandatory clerical celibacy tend to display all sorts of egotistical traits of what one could call bachelorhood that in fact make them less available. Besides, celibacy calls for considerable affective integration and psychological maturity that cannot be required of every candidate for the priesthood. Finally, in the lives of some priests mandatory clerical celibacy becomes a cause and a source of tragic – both to themselves and their victims – and unacceptable ecclesiastic scandals.

Here I see only one realistic, sound policy guideline, already suggested by the gospel saying "Let those accept it who can" (Mt. 19, 13): let those who with God's grace can handle it take it on. Why not leave clergy free to decide in what state, wedded or otherwise, they can perform their ministry in a manner that is most fruitful for the benefit of their flock, and is satisfying and psychologically conducive to a holy, happy life for themselves? Anything else is a counterproductive prestige issue on the part of a church that, consciously or unconsciously, conceals its ulterior motives for enforcing clerical celibacy.

Ordination of women

In reality the church has more female than male members, and often it has more female than male workers. But they have no share in ecclesiastic authority or in ecclesiastic offices – even 'altar girls' are tolerated reluctantly. The church owes women reparation for all kinds of discrimination. Although the first witness to Jesus' resurrection was a woman, in the social culture at that time female testimony had no legal validity. Why can women not officiate in the eucharist? Why can they hold no office of any kind in the church? Dogmatically none of the arguments against it holds water; each comes up against the objection of socio-cultural conditioning. In fact, they are all

ideological. The premise is: it cannot and may not be allowed, and for that reason all manner of ostensibly sensible bot nonetheless nonsensical arguments are advanced. Especially the argument, 'that's the way it's always been' – even when it contains some historical truth – is no argument, since in the long run, even if it dates back to a practice attested by the New Testament itself, it is still not a religious argument. Since its origin in olden times and throughout every period of its life the church has been imbedded in a social culture that co-determined its doings. The argument, 'that's the way it's always been' is not necessarily religious; it may simply refer to cultural mores that do not bind the church today in any way.

The argument that Jesus himself was a man and chose only men to be his apostles (even supposing it can be historically proven) does not tell us how the 20th century church should arrange its choice of candidates for clerical office on the basis of its own pastoral situation; otherwise we lapse into sheer biblicism. Why do proponents of this argument fail to mention that Jesus also chose married apostles, and from that infer that clerical office bearers have to or could be married? These are serious issues which are not given serious theological attention, as often happens in the church when sexuality and 'women' come up for discussion. Why this constant association of sexuality with women, as though sexual malpractices cannot be associated – with far greater historical justice – with males?

From our knowledge of Scripture and the great Christian traditions, as well as our historical and theological analysis and interpretations of the facts concerning clerical office, we can say that none of us, male or female, has any *personal* claim to the priesthood or any other ministry. After all, priests are called by God in Christ via the medium of a Christian church and its leaders, a call that the addressee freely and wholeheartedly affirms but can never lay claim to. But *ecclesiologically* the church has a right to have ordained ministers in its midst, and on the strength of that structural right both men and women, without distinction, are eligible for a divine vocation in the Spirit of Christ. The fact that Jesus Christ was a man is part of his true humanity. Human beings are either male or female. Jesus' true humanity involves all human beings, males as well as females. Incorporation in Jesus Christ and belonging to him, the early church affirms, are effected through baptism. Hence a baptised woman has as much right as the apostle Paul to say, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). This being-in-and-as-Christ makes it possible for men and women alike to be called to holy orders in all its facets, both historical and still to come. The right to be admitted to the priesthood is not personal but ecclesiologically *structural* on the strength of baptismal initiation, which means that especially *in the church of Christ* there is no distinction between Jew and gentile, *male and female,* slave and freeman

(Gal. 3:27-28); when it comes to women holding office in the community of baptised believers the church is blind to this basic law of baptism, yet in the earliest centuries of the Christian era a slave was appointed bishop of Rome on the strength of that very law! As long as we fail to see the implication of the profoundly Christian reality of our baptism we distort the true humanity of Jesus Christ, who guarantees the possibility of admission to every form of church office for baptised women no less than for baptised men.

Believers need to be thoroughly prepared for acceptance by the church of women in holy orders. Cultural prejudices are often deeply ingrained in human nature and it takes time to expose them and actually remove them. Otherwise one heads straight for schism, not on ecclesiastic, theological grounds but for socio-cultural reasons which sometimes carry more weight than theological themes, such as papal primacy, which are accepted without hesitation when it comes to the ordination of women in non-Catholic churches – the clearest evidence that cultural factors play a greater role in this respect than dogmatic considerations. It calls for a new tradition of female priests, one that had already surfaced in the early church in the historical phenomenon of 'official' deaconesses but because of the unfavourable cultural climate of those times – despite sporadic attempts – did not manage to evolve into a full-fledged priesthood. To this I would now add (afterwards, following what I said in an interview, before the Anglican Church's decision was taken) that I am certainly not saying that there was insufficient preparation at every level for, for example, the Anglican Church's decision in England on 11 November 1992 to admit women to the priesthood. On the contrary, that is evidenced by the very the small minority that could not accept this decision. Ecumenically the decision represents openness to the future rather than a new obstacle on the road to ecumenism. After all, the vast majority of Roman Catholic believers think the same.

Future of religious life: living together 'in the Lord' for the good of human beings

Religious life (in whatever form) is not a lifestyle that is distinct from the ordinary Christian life of all believers. To be sure, it has distinctive features that may or may not entail certain vows, but these formal vows are not its essence: that lies in a personal choice of a religious life, affirmed by an essentially like-minded community.

What the three vows entail must first be an authentically human existential option if one wants to experience it 'in the Lord', that is with a view to God's kingdom. Thus poverty in itself is not a virtue but a human situation that most people find humiliating. One can voluntarily declare one's solidarity with the poor, for example in the case of Doctors without Borders, who (with or without religious intentions) champion the cause of the poor. The same applies to obedience, as Father Chenu once observed to a cardinal who praised him for

his obedience to the church when one of his books was prohibited and he remained ecclesiastically suspect for the rest of his theological life: "*Eminence, l'obéissance est une trés petite vertu*" (obedience is hardly a virtue at all). Serving a worthy cause (religious or otherwise) is what makes obedience virtuous, but in itself it is not a virtue. Sexual abstinence, too, is not virtuous or good in itself, but only acquires human and even religious value if it embodies commitment to a human cause (to believers that is also God's cause).

Religious life is not superior to ordinary Christian life. It means choosing a particular lifestyle among the options of Christian living. It must not become an escape from Christian life, which is lived in this world, although religious life that accentuates the eschatological focus of Christianity does entail critical reservations about actions that conform to 'the sinful ways of this world'.

Thus religious life is also a critique of all negative power that oppresses people, of the alienating power of money and possessions, and of abuse of the power of sexuality, which in itself is a key attribute of human life but when abused profoundly damages the person's humanity.

As a result religious are often seen as *enfants terribles* in both the church and the world. Even in their mystical experiences they inspire people to live better lives and be critical of inhumane practices in the world and the church. Their calling is to make *resistance, surrender* and *service* a conscious enterprise.

Pessimistic moralists, predictably, attribute the crisis to decay of people's religious sensibility and ethical values. I don't believe a word of it. So-called secularisation tends to be blamed for everything, counter to all factual evidence. For many people secularisation, viewed sociologically, in fact intensifies the quest for religious meaning. It is rather the often loveless institutional element of church life and the religious life that diminishes the attraction of religious life (seen as a project of a religious community). Secularisation has, quite rightly, squashed supernaturalism as a possibility. It is not a truly human option but a distortion of a human and religious possibility. Particularly in the 19th century and up to Vatican II the religious life was very much supernaturally oriented. Modern people, including believers, now experience it as an other-worldly, ideological conception. In the 1960s that realisation suddenly reached a massive, collective climax: in that period tens of thousands of priests and religious left their monasteries or convents and the priesthood. The new realisation swept the Western world like a whirlwind: *it cannot go on like this any longer.* This massive exodus only became possible following earlier underground stirrings, especially in the 1950s, of something brewing, which on the whole went unnoticed. An exception in the Netherlands was the sociologist J.J. Dellepoort, who in the 1950s pointed out symptoms of the impending decline of what was to become known, after the exodus, as 'rich Roman Catholic life'; but at that time no-one

believed him.[21] Christians by then had had a bellyful of supernaturalism. In my very first publications, as far back as 1945, I opposed the suffocating supernaturalism[22] that gnawed at the very roots of Christian and religious life. In fact, that was what first kindled my passion for theology: opposition to supernaturalism and fideism, to every distortion of what I experience as the living God.

In retrospect the exodus of the 1960s turned out not to have been a loss of authentic religiosity but a shift from religiosity to its incarnation in solidarity with major global problems, notably with the oppressed. Work once done by missionaries was largely taken over by voluntary developmental workers, whether religiously inspired or not. But this religious dimension was 'earthed'; that obviates dangerous short circuits.

A crisis always heralds a new era. What is needed is not so much new orders and congregations but a re-orientation and a different institutional form of the great orders, whose by now more empirically rooted, earthed spirituality would enable them to embark on a new future, albeit no longer entrenched in strongholds like the monasteries and convents of old. Instead they would be smaller, more modest establishments, spread throughout the city and in many parishes to attract people in search of contemplation who want to devote themselves to local religious communities. It should be a tentative growth process rather than a nostalgic or cynical appeal to the last survivors to switch off the light. On the contrary: there are people waiting to take over the torch. Are *we giving* them their turn?

7. REVIEW: GRADUALLY EMERGING BASIC STRUCTURE OF MY THEOLOGICAL THINKING

Current context of Christian religious discussion

Nowadays the Christian faith is inevitably discussed in the conscious context of a world full of sense and nonsense, joy and adversity; a world which, on the threshold of the 21st century, is horrified by new holocausts; and finally, one in which virtually all ideologies have collapsed and, more is the pity, in the absence of an opposition party with a different economic mind-set, the only remaining ideology – capitalism, with its propensity for violence – has the upper hand in every sphere, with the result that rich nations get ever richer and poor ones slide deeper into poverty. Here and there one even discerns a certain cynicism or at any rate an apocalyptic fatalism, while others are in a

[21] See J.J. Dellepoort, *De priesterroepingen in Nederland; proeve van een statistisch-sociologische analyse*, The Hague, 1955.

[22] Especially in: 'Christelijke situatie', in: *Kultuurleven* 12 (1945), 82-95; 229-242; 585-611; also: 'Schepselbesef als grondslag van het geestelijk leven', in: *Tijdschrift voor Geestelijk Leven*, I-1 (1945), 15-43. Also see: 'Nederig humanisme', in: *Kultuurleven* XVI-1 (1949), 12-21.

state of dejection and are experiencing a new kind of helplessness that paralyses them, preventing all action.

As happens in every historical era in which the socio-economic structure is undergoing radical change, hence when the dominant culture is running out of steam and the new one is still emerging with as yet indistinct features, one discerns a sort of *fin de siècle* mentality that implants itself in the unconscious minds of many contemporary people like some sort of virus. Such historical phases are usually full of gloomy prophets of doom and resounding cries from human hearts testifying to religious hunger, or at least a quest for a new inwardness, even a pronounced individualism. In its modern and postmodern state, maybe even beyond postmodernism, the Western world is looking for fresh meaning of what could be called human destiny, even to establish whether questions about meaning are still 'meaningful'. The process is occurring, moreover, on a 'scorched earth', because the matrix, the compost of all life is steadily being poisoned by humans themselves – even though I once heard an engineer resident in America say, "Nature is very forgiving": humanly polluted nature appears to forgive us a great deal; it raises itself up again. But there may be limits to nature's endurance and its forgiving character.

I wrote this review of my theological quests in such an atmosphere of gloom and hope. The underlying question is: in such a critical situation, what is the task of the Christian churches? More than that, to what extent has the church itself become hesitant, wavering, because it is part of the critical situation and is tied up with it? The future of the Christian churches is closely linked to their involvement in the world's future, in the enormous problems and suffering of human beings in this world. To be of service to humankind here and now the church's focus should not be on itself but on people. Otherwise it loses its plausibility.

Fundamental contrast experiences

The background to my thinking in recent decades is what I have called with growing clarity *radical basic experience.* I have in mind a basic experience common to all people and, as such, pre-religious and accessible to all. It is an experience of a veto, of indignation that seethes in us when we look at the actual state of the world with its repetitive history of suffering and injustice. Reality as we experience it every day, what we see, read and hear about (in newspapers, on television and via other media) makes us shudder: it is not what it can and should be. It is a scurrying anthill of contradictions and suffering. Human experience of suffering and evil, oppression and misfortune underlies and is the source of a radical *no* that human beings say, often shout when they witness the actual state of our world. This experience is more unmistakable and certain than the testable knowledge offered by science and

philosophy. Indignation is a fundamental existential and experiential category in a world governed by consumerism, pleasure, oblivion and … power, violence and oppression.

Nobody would deny that there are many positive experiences as well; much in life is good and beautiful. It is not a matter of espousing a new dualism or a pessimistic worldview. I am not advocating defeatist doom and gloom, nor – which would be worse – a cunning, manipulative strategy to depict the modern world as so sombre, colourless and decadent that the light brought by Jesus Christ will seem all the brighter, more liberating and salvific and will therefore be welcomed all the more triumphantly – a ploy that Christian moralists used to resort to. A plausible saviour has no need of such strategies.

On the one hand it is clear that the presence of so much goodness, beauty and meaning is constantly contradicted and overshadowed by the evil and viciousness around us and in us, by flagrantly obvious and covert suffering, by abuses of power and terrorism. These manifest contradictions create the impression that evil and good cancel each other out and argue each other away. That's how cynics see it! Non-cynics, on the other hand, do not see it as indicative of a society so decadent that there is nothing left to motivate people to live or to be worth dying for. Despite all their misery people remain aware of their human dignity and refuse to judge and evaluate evil on a par with goodness.

Meanwhile our world remains a bewildering mix of good and evil, sense and nonsense, sin and virtue. History gives us no reason or clue to decide whether good or evil will finally triumph. Indeed, it does not even tell us whether a positive appraisal, a final good word can ever be pronounced on history. From a human perspective our history may well prove a failure and so *forfeit* any ultimate, lasting meaning.

Human faith and unshakable hope: 'autonomously human' virtues already present in humankind prior to religion

Despite all this (which is why I deliberately said 'forfeit' above), there is still people's overriding 'no' to inhumanity in our history, a stubborn, unswerving indignation as long as oppression and repression taunt and mortally wound, subjugate and torture human beings: men, women, even children. And then we must acknowledge and confess that a second, different dimension is discernible in these negative contrast experiences and the indignation of those who suffer or witness inhumanity. This human repudiation of inhumanity, this rebellion against everything that wounds people's humanity, hence the human refusal to acquiesce in the facts opens up a *positive perspective*. I would analyse this second aspect of our basic experience as follows: even if I cannot picture

what a more humane world would look like, I have an experience of, 'So far and no further!' or 'Never again!' 'The world, we ourselves must change.'

But that is a surprising development! After all, human resistance to inhumanity in our history reveals *openness* to a new situation that warrants an unconditional yes. One might call it an affirmation of 'the unknown', a better situation whose nature eludes positive definition: a different, better world which has not yet materialised either on earth or in heaven. One could also say: this dimension reveals a positive expectation in human life that our world can be improved. The indignation, which in the given situation is moral, at all events attests *faith in the humanity of humankind.* In these negative experiences one hears the echo of a human *cry of hope* against all odds in our ambivalent history marked by suffering and injustice: *still there is hope; it can and must be different.* Without that hope the very real experience of indignation is non-existent, internally untenable, pointless and without human substance. Human indignation per se, without at least a latent positive yearning for human dignity, is intrinsically absurd.

Hence humans' fundamental resistance to evil reveals an as yet unspecified but 'open yes' that is no less adamant than the human veto on all inhumanity; in fact, more adamant than the 'no', because it actually *grounds, permits* and *legitimises* the rebellion. In this sense the hope living in humankind is more radical than all negative contrast experiences, which in themselves presuppose anticipation of something better and indirectly reveal the presence of hope.

In addition there are sporadic, fragmentary but real experiences of meaning and happiness, great or small, that continually nourish, affirm and sustain the 'open yes'. In such experiences, too, believers and unbelievers find each other. It provides a sound basis for solidarity of everyone with everyone else and for a common endeavour to establish a better world with a human face.

Sir Richard Attenborough's Anglo-Indian film in 1982 centres on the unshakable conviction of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), assassinated on 30 January 1948, that *ultimately* love and solidarity will triumph over violence and oppression. Mandela, too, is a shining example. Such people keep hope alive and humankind on its toes. Even an initially militant atheist and at all events convinced agnostic like Jean-Paul Sartre said on his deathbed, counter to all the evil and inhumanity in history: "And yet I keep believing in people's humanity." As long as injustice and suffering evoke protest and indignation humans remain steadfast in their hope. In Christianity belief in the life, message and praxis of Jesus of Nazareth and the gospel of his life, death and resurrection deepens that hope into the great good news of God's promise of salvation to all humankind. Hence it is not just a cry of hope in the face of despair, but also a hope that even prior to its eschatological fulfilment can

already be celebrated and *even now* – in a time of the earthly 'not yet' – calls for celebration.

Role of the religions

The history of religions confirms this slant on the human world. After all, images and anticipations of salvation, liberation and human happiness are always based on concrete experience and reflection on the reality of evil, oppression, suffering, misery and alienation. They stem from accumulated negative experiences in the course of centuries of suffering with brief flashes of experience promising joy and salvation, partial experiences of salvation and liberation in a history of unfulfilled hopes, guilt and evil over many generations. In the end it gives rise to an 'anthropological' scheme, a vision and image of what may be regarded as authentic, happy, worthy humanity, however precarious, imperfect and fragmentary its realisation in our history.

Despite constant criticism and always surviving it, the human yearning for salvation, deliverance and happiness in its many forms inevitably acquires the loaded connotation of 'salvation from' or 'deliverance from', and at the same time of 'entry into' a whole new world. In this way negative experiences delineate people's positive conceptions and hopes of salvation – the positive mirror images of their concrete experience of evil. In these images one can read, as it were, their history of suffering, even if the exact course of that history can no longer be traced in other sources.

There is even more to be learnt from history. Evil, injustice and suffering – according to both spontaneous and considered insight – can no longer be placed either theoretically or in practice: theoretically they cannot be explained or rendered intelligible in some interpretive framework, nor can they be vanquished or eliminated by practical measures. As a result the many salvific hopes that have arisen in the course of human history have acquired a *religious* dimension. Humankind expects salvation and deliverance to come from somewhere beyond themselves – 'by divine providence'. Those who believe in an all-encompassing Mystery – they then speak of 'God' by whatever name – attach religious meaning to their fundamental contrast experience with its aspect of human hope and expectation – despite everything, hence with a concomitant human cri de cœur for salvation and deliverance. It is a meaningful and legitimate, albeit not mandatory, human possibility and in fact a universal phenomenon in human history. That is how religions are born in our history, in which people look for ultimate meaning in the midst of meaninglessness. They appear to experience their ultimate and eternal destiny – actually a 'cause of humankind as such' – as 'a cause of God'. The two are inseparable and do not present a dilemma that requires a choice one way or the other. Transcendence implies immanence, it is the same thing viewed from different angles. The first still nebulous, indeterminate but positive 'open yes'

that comes with the contrast experience is thrown into vivid relief by the recognised religious dimension and sometimes, 'just sometimes' even reveals the face of a mild and merciful mystery that, after our rebellion against our situation, invites us to surrender to that underlying enigma. *There are more things in heaven and earth* than human theory and praxis can take control of!

Jesus' distinctive 'ministry of God'

Jesus' coming, like that of all religions, is historically situated.

Historically the time in which Jesus of Nazareth lived was an age of messianism for Jews and non-Jews alike, crystallising in a whole spectrum of messianic expectations gleaned from centuries of fleeting experiences of salvation and, more especially, from innumerable unfulfilled hopes and persistent injustice and suffering. Throughout Asia Minor this spirit actually bred a distinct literary genre and mentality: apocalypticism. It gave rise to an all but irresistible longing to put an end once and for all to the oppression under which people lived: enough is enough! We are sick of it; it is time the world changed radically and the human heart was fundamentally transformed. *God himself would take a hand in it*, albeit as always via human agency and human history. This applied from the outset to the tradition to which Jesus belonged. Yahweh spoke: "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and *I have come down to deliver them …* and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex.3:7-8).

The ultimate destiny of humankind …

My mind keeps reverting to the question of the specifically Christian component of the hoped for salvation and deliverance. For salvation and deliverance cannot be confined to salvation of souls, although that is very much part of it. What is at issue is salvation *of people.* That involves the entire person: their bodily and, therefore, their ecological state; psychosomatic structure; personal identity in relation to fellow humans, 'the other', in the midst of the community at large with its social structures, the outcome of all manner of explicitly intended but also of many unintended factors, a society that is given to us and yet, despite the tenacity of its structures, is 'changeable'. Hence people live in their human condition that includes a spiritual dimension, yet are trapped in a tangle of external and inner sinfulness, which alienates them from God.

What this perfect, permanent or eschatological salvation will ultimately be surpasses our rational, verifiable concepts. The indefinable nature of the sought-after eschatological human perfection and freedom, always found only fragmentarily and always endangered, can only be expressed in symbolic,

metaphoric terms. I have regularly pointed out, but want to reiterate here, that four great metaphors in the Judaeo-Christian tradition suggest the direction in which Christians have to look for a clue to God's grand dream for the future of humankind, so that they – men and women − will finally start living in peace and joy with all their fellow creatures even here on earth.

1. The final salvation or radical liberation of humankind in a brotherly and sisterly society and community, where master-servant relations no longer prevail, pain and tears will be wiped out and forgotten, and God will "be everything to everyone" (1 Cor 15:28), is called the *kingdom of God*.

2. The perfect salvation and joy of the person (what the Bible calls *sarx*, body or flesh) in that perfect community is known in the Christian tradition as the *resurrection of the body*, that is divine affirmation of the human person down to our *human* corporeality, which is the visible orchestration, the distinctive melody of a person that others can also enjoy (even though the glorified body has nothing to do with the corpse it has left behind, it has everything to do with the person's humanity and hence with her or his personal corporeality).

3. The eschatological consummation of the pristine ecological environment, so essential for human life, is suggested by the great biblical metaphor of a *new heaven and a new earth*: not a different world (that would imply contempt for and rejection of the original good creation) but our earthly world, redeemed from upheaval – even though I cannot visualise it. The possibility of visualising it is not important to us here and now: there are many surprises in store for us!

4. Finally, the fundamental, even constitutive role and significance of Jesus (indeed a human being, from some place called Nazareth), whom Christians confess as the Christ, in the establishment of fragments of God's kingdom here and now, and also in the eschatological consummation of that kingdom, will be revealed to all. That can only be expressed in the biblical image of *Maranatha* (Come, Lord Jesus), the most profound emotion and longing of Christendom. The eschatological image of *Jesus Christ's parousia*, which cannot really be analysed in human language, is nourished by the experience and memory of what Christians already call – albeit with some diffidence, actually daringly – the uniqueness of Jesus Christ (without any claim to exclusion or inclusion of other religions). What Christianity calls Jesus' parousia or 'return' in the final fulfilment of God's kingdom is really the heavenly disclosure of the true meaning of Jesus of Nazareth to all people. This ultimate uniqueness is that Jesus, the judge of the world or Son of man, pronounces God's final judgment on human history and that he, the crucified outcast of our history, will bring eternal justice to all those who were cast out, tortured and killed by and in human history: *they* are promised exaltation.

... already starts on earth

But let us be wary: after all, there is no heaven without earth! We always learn anew that the same problems that divide the world divide Christian communities as well. That means that the four metaphoric visions of the future that God is preparing for human beings must influence and direct believers' conduct in the world here and now. They translate the *meta-ethical,* 'theologal' or God-centred, mystical) source of Christians' *ethical* engagement in this world, an ethical input itself *directly* grounded in human dignity, which holds good for Christians as well. This inviolable human dignity ultimately does not differ from creatureliness; to Christians the 'autonomously human' *foundation* of all ethics is identical with the notion that human dignity actually points beyond the person to God and may be called 'God's will' by believers.

Through the dynamics peculiar to these metaphors the four eschatological images direct Christian conduct quite specifically: it has to be aimed at greater justice, peace and the integrity of all creation, which includes social amelioration for everybody, but especially for the outcasts, the voiceless and marginalised, those who have been stricken by life. It should also be directed to pastoral care for communication among people, and to unremitting criticism of culture and society wherever such institutions wound people and injustice is rife. It should be directed to care for the human body, and the psychological and mental health of men and women in our society; for our scorched earth, the environment of everything that grows and flourishes, comes to life and breathes; for the purity and strength of what one might call God-centred or 'theologal' virtues: faith, hope and love; for a meaningful, prayerful liturgy and truly human, meaningful sacramental worship by the religious community; for spirituality and a culture of prayer; and for pastoral ministry to individuals, especially the lonely and those "who have no hope" (1 Thes. 4:13).

The biblical narrative sums up ongoing creation strikingly: God's act of creation calls man to be the *image of God.* Man, male and female: that is the image of himself that God put in the midst of creation. All human activities in this world and in history should reflect God's rule, that is to say, that his kingdom is embodied in just relationships, peace among people and nations on a healthy, harmonious earth, a universe at peace with the living God, the heart and source of all salvation history. Alas, Christians and their leaders often distort and mutilate this image of God; they, too, do not always reveal God's *truly human* face, and thereby sin against his divinity.

The question of *Christian identity* is inseparable from that of *human integrity.* The answer cannot be purely theoretical. Essentially it implies a specifically Christian praxis, both mystical/God-centred and ethical/practical, extending to the ecology and socio-political life as well. *Talk about God* only

becomes genuinely meaningful and 'productive' in the framework of the *praxis of his kingdom.*

Theology and spirituality

Despite all scientific considerations theologising has to be backed by spirituality. By 'spirituality' I mean the fundamental attitude and inspiration that directs the way people live their lives and keep going in human history, to which and in which they devote themselves. That is wholly tied up with the quest for God, a quest that is the core of all theology, including my writings, and also should be the core of' ecclesiastic policy and management. In the Roman Catholic Church this management can paralyse the metaphoric power of the grand eschatological visions that I have outlined through ill-judged canons. That calls to mind the admonition in the book of Proverbs: "Where there is no prophecy the people cast off restraint" (Prov. 29:18).

Someone once said, "God started in history when a person said 'God'." [23] But I would add: God's actions in history precede that human word and evoked it! In the biblical narrative I hear God saying, as it were: go on your way, man, male and female, work of my hands, work of my love. You are not alone, *for I, YHWH, am the one who will be there for you*. Go forth, and in your own footmarks on the road of history you will discern the features of my love. Does the author of letter to the Hebrews not say it?

"For he has said
'I will never fail nor forsake you.'
Hence we can confidently say,
'The Lord is my helper,
I will not be afraid'" (Hebr. 13:5b-6a).

[23] "Dieu a commencé dans l'histoire lorsqu'un homme a dit 'DIEU' " (A. Zaul, 'Pour l'écriture sainte', in: *Etudes* 1979, 683. J. Pohier puts it differently but means much the same thing: "Dieu devient Dieu quand les créatures disent DIEU" (with reference to Master Eckhart, *Sermo Nolite timere eos*), in: *Quand je dis Dieu*, Paris, 1977, 7.

Chapter 7

CULTURE, RELIGION AND VIOLENCE:
Theology as a component of culture

The subtitle of this chapter derives from Erik Borgman's contribution to the special issue of the Dutch *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* on the occasion of my 80th birthday.[1] In this article I want to adapt and elaborate on my lecture on culture in a recent book written for a largely academic readership of non-theologians from various worldview-related backgrounds,[2] partly in response to Erik Borgman's critical comments on my theology of culture, and partly in response to nasty questions raised of late about the role of religion and violence. I start by proceeding from the general angle of my lecture: the structure and sources of culture, language and art; as a result the first part of this chapter may appear somewhat abrupt, but that serves a purpose.

1. EXPLORING THE FIELD

Without art a culture is '-less': toneless, formless, colourless. Culture without art, or a world without language, is something like hardware without software, a world which offers little joy even in a computerised environment saturated with science and technology. On the other hand art only becomes culture if it offers a human perspective that opens up new horizons. For despite or because of the fact that humans as natural beings share the mineral, chemical and biochemical makeup of all natural beings, ultimately they are above all 'cultural' manifestations on this planet, however barbarically – even inhumanly − these cultural beings may behave. Even in this barbarism

[1] E. Borgman, 'Van cultuurtheologie naar theologie als onderdeel van de cultuur: de toekomst van het theologisch project van Edward Schillebeeckx', in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 34 (1994), 335-360.

[2] The lecture was an academic paper I read on 23 September 1995 in Bruges at the 40th anniversary of the Order of the Prince (William of Orange), a Flemish-Dutch debating society representing diverse worldviews for the promotion of culture in the Netherlands true to and tolerant of the spirit of [William of] Orange, as the statutes of the society put it. The lecture appears (under the same title) in: *Cultuur als grensverleggende beweging*, vol. 6 of the Order of the Prince, 1996, 9-30.

humankind, by virtue of its culture, distinguishes itself from other natural beings, which certainly display their own forms of cruelty, but always for the sake of their own survival or that of their species. If one studies the pictures in the daily press one sees that human culture and barbarism can embrace each other. Using the cultural achievements of science and technology, valuable products in themselves, cultural beings in our day are relentlessly exterminating one another, both others and themselves. Culture can be a jungle, or worse: a holocaust.

This contradiction, inherent in human culture yet culturally absurd, makes us ask suspiciously what 'culture' really is. However valuable to humankind science and technology may be as cultural achievements, in the context of the intrinsically cultural contradiction it is nonetheless tragically evident that a purely 'instrumental culture', explicitly deficient in other cultural phenomena, dehumanises people. For if these phenomena – artistic creativity, gratuitous activities such as concern, respect, admiration or indignation, emotion in response to beauty, amazement in the face of engaging humaneness and the (explicit or otherwise) religious depth dimension of human beings – are lacking, culture is truncated and cries out for an additional quota, an injection of contemplative, aesthetic, playful, ethical and religious human culture. There is truth that all the sciences, jointly and severally, can never offer. This irrepressible truth, the ungraspable mystery of our humanness (and what it presupposes), is probably the cardinal requirement for civilised human life as culturally pioneering beings.

In the modern and postmodern era, maybe even beyond postmodernity, Westerners in particular are looking for fresh meaning for what may be called human destiny, even though some postmodern people believe that questions about meaning have little or no meaning at all.[3] On the one hand our contemporaries want to escape from the terrorising dogmatism of people, systems and religions that profess to have a monopoly on truth and in the course of our history have sought to marginalise, discredit, mercilessly mow down or obliterate each other in some way. On the other hand we want to escape from radical relativism that recognises no norms or values, no loyalty or free commitment, and thus discredits and undermines people's humanity: 'fragments' pasted onto and against a chaotic background – a kind of junk yard with something in it resembling a weeping human head or a mutilated child's

[3] Apart from well-known works by postmodernists, also see: Z. Bauman, *Legislators and interpreters: On modernity, postmodernity and intellectuals*, Cambridge, 1987; idem, *Modernity and the holocaust*, ibid 1989; also idem, *lmitators of postmodernity*, London, 1992; J. Baudrillard, *America,* London 1988; idem, *Cool memories*, London 1990; *Body invaders*, A. & M. Kroker (eds), London, 1991 (especially J. Baudrillard, 'The year 2000 has already happened', 35-44); A. Giddens, *The consequences of modernity*, Cambridge, 1990; B.S. Turner, *Orientalism, postmodernism, and globalism*. London/New York, 1994.

face. This postmodern process is moreover running its course on an exhausted planet, because humans are gradually poisoning the actual matrix, the humus, the earthly soil of all possible culture. I once heard a Flemish engineer resident in America say, "Nature is very forgiving." Humanly degraded nature appears to forgive us a lot, on its own steam it raises itself up from all the havoc and pollution. But there are limits to nature's endurance and forgiveness, and that sets off alarm bells. Culture seems to pose a threat to nature, and as a result to humans and authentic, respectful human culture. That makes us enquire about culture as a perennially ground-breaking movement in the service of truly human liberation and wellbeing, respecting the autonomy of what we call earth and all that live on it.

2. TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF WHAT CULTURE REALLY IS – OR IS IT NECESSARY?

1. General definitions of culture

When I spoke about one-sided culture I was somewhat casually assuming a consciously differentiated or explicit definition of the exact meaning of the word. Hence I first have to clarify that assumption. What, actually, is culture? And what is the real place of art and language in the complex phenomenon that we call culture? I don't much like squabbles about definitions. As far back as 1952 cultural anthropologists like A. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn collected more than 169 definitions of culture.[4] Their general definition reads: (1) culture is everything that is learnt or transmitted in a community, but (2) it is also the manner in which such learning and transmission take place. A definition that says everything and nothing.

A few simple definitions get us further. In general we could say that culture is the world made by humans, in design and action, in theory and practice; at the same time it is the actual process of production. Culture is the human world against the backdrop of nature. The cultural world also includes labour, technology and economics – although some sciences regard these sectors as 'civilisation', which they distinguish from culture.

Culture in general is what people can produce – and, for better or for worse, have already produced − from or with pre-existent nature through their own technical and artistic, physical and mental endeavours. Such human production is cultural activity and its result is what we call our cultural heritage. Culture, again very generally, is the concrete, humanly created, historically transmitted and historically constantly changing human life world. A virtually universally accepted notion by now is one deriving from the Parisian *École des Annales*, which classifies cultural changes in three categories:

[4] Cf. *Critical culture: a review of concepts and definitions*, New York, 1995.

minor, so to speak 'overnight' changes; conjunctural changes that take far more time; and finally, almost imperceptible but, from a historical point of view, radical structural changes, a tenacious process that may take centuries.

The reason why some maintain that labour, technology and economics are not part of culture in a real, specific sense calls for some clarification. In our human world labour, technology and economics pertain to the utilitarian sector, based on humankind's dependence on nature and its natural needs. This utilitarian world serves to reproduce what exists. According to this view genuine human culture starts at the point where the utilitarian world of means and ends or instrumental rationality is transcended. Only when people transcend this constraint do they become truly human carriers or creators of culture. Only in this unconstrained sphere do they construct an autonomous world of 'things' that are worthwhile in and for themselves. Thus culture is the sphere in which all pragmatism and utilitarianism, including that which people have created, are transcended. Viewed thus, culture is the antithesis of everyday life: the sector of free, what one might call 'bestowed' gratuity, the luxury of not-needing-to as a preliminary stage of the most profound need of free human beings: being allowed and able happily to be themselves, just for the fun of it! Hence in its autonomy culture is a sphere of freedom in the need-driven everyday world of human beings, a sector pointing to utopia, a no man's land in which daily life is totally liberated. I still remember, years ago while holidaying in Germany, having a haircut and noticing the loads of cosmetics the barber used. So I said, "Please, sir, no luxuries." He answered like a shot: "That's not luxury, *mein Herr*, that is culture." The church father Augustine already used the basic categories of *uti* (utility; 'necessaries') and *frui* (gratuitous, 'inessential', not needed: enjoyment).

Yet many people tend to restrict, even reduce the concept of culture to art, a sector of human life that elevates itself above the utilitarian level and in the process points beyond itself to a utopia of freedom, righteousness, enjoyment and perfect reconciliation. As a free, autonomous sphere culture is equated with the realisation of utopian liberty.

I don't want to criticise such definitions – indeed, they contain some truth. But what interests me more is how culture functions. How does it operate? One could say, firstly, as a perennial reference to the mysterious origin of all culture, a response to the human question about its basis or source; and secondly, as 'texture', for instance the internal textual and contextual fabric of language. For to my mind the structure of language is the model that affords most insight into the distinctive fabric of culture and art; their structure displays the same configurations of fabric as language, especially evident when (and as) objectified in texts. Culture and art can be approached in the

same way that one reads and interprets a linguistic text. Just as culture and art are forms of human activity, so they are also forms of human language.

2. Reason for and source of all culture

Many cultural anthropologists forget to look into the origin of all culture. To humans their senses are the obvious access to the world they live in. Without sensory impressions they have no images or concepts, no ideas; without bodily sensory contact human understanding of the world is impossible. By comparison abstract concepts seem like residues of the richness and power already captured in images. Even artistic abstraction, known as abstract aPlatort, is more concrete than all sorts of conceptual interpretations of the world.

We must remember that sense perception – that is, when we see, smell, hear, taste and touch things – entails more than purely material sensation. Human sense perception includes cultural activity. After all, a person is mind-in-body − not a body (like an animal's) *plus* a mind or spirit (like an angel). That would be crude dualism: any polarisation between sensory and mental activity concerns the one integrated mind-body, hence not some sort of incarnated angel. Sensory experience is just that: sensory. But (and that is the mystery of human beings) our sense perception entails more than what animals see, hear, taste, touch or smell, even when looking at the same thing as a human being does. Without the spark of illuminating inwardness of the human mind operative in our sensory experience – which classical thinkers like Plato and Aristotle, the Christian church fathers and medieval philosophers and mystics in all ages already called the 'soul-spark' (*scintilla animae*), or 'the light that comes from the interior power of the spirit' (*synderesis*) – the substance of reality that we touch, see, smell., hear and taste would be shallow and univocal: a dull reality. That inner mental spark, a brilliant inward light irradiating the human mind-body (that is, the human being), and via this 'animated' corporeality, the mental illumination or enlightenment of the world unfurling and opening up to our sense perception, is what awakens people, stimulated by the human sensory world, to visions, dreams and identifications, as well as to theoretical cultural works or artworks: the products of this 'visionary seeing', dreaming or theorising. That opens up the future as unanticipated adventure and transforms the present even now. Human seeing, hearing and touch are truly cultural activities here and now; they are the germ of all culture.

Without this inwardly illuminating power people would live in their own shadows, in purely ephemeral day-to-day pursuit of survival of their species. They would never surpass themselves but simply trail behind the facts. And even that would foreshadow culture, just as in evolution as a whole the animal

kingdom heralds the emergence of the human race as a kingdom of cultural beings.

A biologist once told me that people differed from animals in that they not only lived in the world of their everyday needs and interests, but also in another, new world. Indeed, fired by sense perception humans appear to be able, through their illuminating mental spark, to transform raw worldly material into new shapes, colours, sounds and shapes, and into abstract and theoretical concepts. That is not a world that simply is there, cumbrous and massive, as it were *an sich,* a dark, stagnant, murky, dank watery waste comparable to primeval chaos, the *tohu wa bohu* of the Hebrew creation story, or a swamp that we can point to and whose actuality can even be tested scientifically. The world is a chunk of earth which, without humans, could not even be called a landscape. Earth as a landscape exists only by virtue of the presence of human cultural beings; landscape is a human cultural datum, without implying anything either for or against anthropocentrism in the universe. The corporeally seeing human mind brings landscape, figures and form to the sensory world. The so-called objective outside world of a golden wheat field (does it actually exist without sensory stimulation of the human eye?) is not the same as Vincent van Gogh's golden field of wheat, but neither is it unrelated to the experience his senses afforded him, a creative artist, in the dazzling sunlight of southern France.

A painter, sculptor, actor or poet, a composer or orchestral conductor, a theorist or thinker, a scientist, doctor, philosopher or theologian is a creator of culture, an artist, as in their own way all human beings are who create something beautiful: they work creatively with the material available to them. But artists do not have keener sense perception, nor are they like the prisoner in Plato's cave, who through a gap in the vault sees only passing shadows of reality in the radiant sunlight outside. No, artists – cultural human beings – are simply liberated, free people who have escaped their prison walls. In words, images, music, concepts they capture reality or evoke new realities from these. It is the madness of the sensory confrontation with an inner focus that fires and consumes them as artists or thinkers, driving, even compelling them to create: existentially they cannot do otherwise! As human beings they are, as it were, challenged to act culturally. They never see one-dimensionally and no photographic image, however sharply focused, even scientifically substantiated, of what can be seen in the so-called outside world can ever reflect what artists authentically see. From raw materials they themselves bring the visual world to life – freely create it. The sensory life world in which people live, and in which artists in particular sojourn, is not an instant, photographically recordable exposure or static stone like the pillar of salt that Lot's wife turned into. The life world is a dream, a vision: herald of hope or

despair, by virtue of human beings. A theist would add: by virtue of humans as images of the creator God, which to believers is not − people being God's images specifically in their autonomous humanity – an extra appendage: autonomous creativity as a human quality reflects God's creativity. Hence some people can be fully creative without experiencing any relationship with something transcendent. Conversely, too: if they betray their humanity, the cultural world is often an intensified source of despair, hatred and dull dejection. Not all artworks are what one would call beautiful, nice or pretty, nor are all theoretical and scientific systems. They can curse and swear, convey praise or bitter reproach, like the prophetic imprecatory psalms in the Old Testament; they can even kill: instigate hatred or violence and thereby crush humankind and – believers maintain – God's image in humankind.

3. Culture, art: also a language

Every culture or cultural activity, even when it is rebelling against the established culture, involves a cultural experiential tradition. Culture is a historically transmitted pattern of meanings, incorporated in symbols; a system of inherited notions embodied in symbolic forms, by means of which people communicate with one another and stabilise and develop their knowledge of and attitude towards life,[5] or rebel against it. After all, culture is a form of human communicative behaviour. That presupposes many partners, so that collective orientations, structures and worlds of symbolic meaning feature in the text and context of every artwork. Art in the general and particular sense of the word is a form of language: a text with a context against the backdrop of an always dynamic horizon of cultural experience and understanding. Hence essential components of all art forms, as of language, are a text, an intra-

[5] C. Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures*, New York, 1973, 89; cf. J. Habermas, *Theorie des* kommunikativen *Handelns: Zur Kritik der funktionalistische Vernunft*, II, Frankfurt-M., 1981, 229-293. For elaborate studies of the concept of culture, see: A. Andersch, *Die Blindheit des Kunstwerks und andere Aufsetze*, Frankfurt-M., 1965; E. Burke, *Philosophical enquiry into the origin of ideas of the sublime and the beautiful*, New York, 1957; D. Daniels, *Duchamp und die Anderen: Der Modellfall einer künstlerischen Wirkungsgeschichte in der Moderne*, Keulen, 1992; U. Eco, *Kunst und Schönheit im Mittelalter*, Munchen, 1991; R. Guardini, *Über das Wesen des Kunstwerks*, Stuttgart/Tübingen, 1948; W. Hahne, *De arte celebrandi oder Vom der Kunst, Gottesdienst zu feiern*, Freiburg-Br., [2]1991; H.R. Jauss, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik,* Frankfurt-M., 1991; W. Perpeet, 'Kultur, Kulturphilosophie', in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, IV (1976), 1309-1324; R. Pinkxten, *Culturen sterven langzaam: Over interculturele communicatie*, Antwerp/Baarn, 1994; M. Seel, *Die Kunst der Entzweiung: Zum Begriff der ästhetischen Rationalität*, Frankfurt-M., 1985; G. Steunebrink, *Kunst, utopie en werkelijkheid: Adorno's esthetica en metafysica tegen de achtergrond van Kant en Hegel,* Tilburg, 1991; J.-P. Wils, *'Ästhetische Güte': Mythos und Leiblichkeit im Verhaltnis von Ethik und Ästhetik*, München, 1990; *Kultur als Christlicher Auftrag heute,* Hg. A. Paus, Kevelaar, 1981; *Kultur: Bestimmungen im 20. Jahrhundert*, Hg. H. Brackert & F. Werfelmeyer, Frankfurt-M., 1990; *Das Symbol - Brücke des Verstehens*, Hg. J. Oelkers & K. Wegenast, Stuttgart/Berlin/Cologne, 1991; *Theologie und ästhetische Erfahrung: Beiträge zur Begegnung von Religion und Kunst*, Hg. W. Lesch, Darmstadt, 1994. Also see the special issue cited in n.1: 'Temidden van de cultuur', *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* (1994), No. 4.

textual, close context and a broader experiential and hermeneutic horizon. That whole constitutes the meaning or, deliberate non-meaning, as the case may be, of an artwork.

It implies (here I merely mention it) that an artwork, like language, has both semantic and pragmatic meaning, as well as a conjunctural hermeneutic horizon. I cite a linguistic example. The statement, 'The door is open', in itself has semantic meaning: not the window or the chimney but the door is open. Yet the same statement can have all sorts of pragmatic connotations. It could mean, 'close the door, there is a draught', or 'lower your voice, people can hear you', or 'you have offended me, buzz off!' Finally, the semantic and pragmatic meaning of the statement falls in a broader cultural frame of reference: the text of a 17th author calls up all sorts of cultural backgrounds not found in modern authors' work, which reflect a contemporary experiential and hermeneutic horizon. That applies to all artworks.

Culture concerns a collective experiential tradition of a particular community in a given era. You never start from nothing. You accumulate personal experience in a cultural experiential tradition which co-determines that experience. Learning from experience is a process that happens when a new concrete experience is related to previously acquired knowledge and experiences. Each experience is an interpretive perception in its own right, imbedded in an existing, prior, concretely historical experiential tradition, and is structured by theoretical philosophical models. Nobody starts off experiencing things or writing text on a blank slate. The story was started before we pick up the pen.

In art, as in the sciences, there were periods when the existing culture was taken for granted and beyond criticism; that is when conventional, maybe neo-classical artists hold the floor. But there were also periods of dissatisfaction with cultural conventions, moments of crisis, even discontinuity, in which conscious bearers of culture critically discard traditional meanings and introduce unconventional or rebellious novelties.

Through the interaction – action and reaction – between new experience and existing cultural heritage either the new experience or the traditional culture is exposed to criticism. New experience is dismantled and its authenticity is evaluated or, conversely, because of the new experience, the inherited cultural tradition is corrected and adjusted. But every now and again we come up against a barrier that proves recalcitrant to any attempt to correct or adjust the familiar hermeneutic horizon. The hitherto obvious way of dealing with reality increasingly loses plausibility, while it is just as impossible to revert to the immediate self-evidence of the world; for that time is irretrievably past and the immediacy never existed: after all, experience is always gained within cultural points of reference, never unmediated.

That polarity leads to rebellion and triggers unconventional action. Like the famous Belgian painter Magritte, who painted a man's head with an unmistakable, huge pipe in his mouth and below it the title: "That's not a pipe". Or other artists who assemble a jumble of newspaper cuttings, wrecked cars, objects collected from wastepaper baskets or garbage dumps, totally wrenched out of the context of the so-called traditional human cultural world. They eschew all conventional, recognisable objects; they don't seek to create meaning. But through their creative nonsense they capture the attention of the uncomprehending viewer, who nonetheless feels compelled to look for meaning. An individual expression that does not occur in the viewers' familiar culture makes them aware that their world strikes the artist as an unreal pseudo-world, sheer illusion, and challenges them to interpret and, in the case of genuine artworks, even to transform their familiar world. Thus visitors to the grave of the famous artist Marcel Duchamp read on the headstone: "After all, it's always someone else who dies." Quite a thought for visitors who are set up as clowns in a play of irony and indictment, which inevitably puts them in mind of their own death. On the Saturday before I read the original version of this paper I had the amusing experience of seeing in a television broadcast of "Last night of the proms" (in which on the director's instructions bursting balloons was prohibited) a flat yellow disc stuck up in the hall with the apodictic caption: "This is a balloon". In our time cultural expressions of diverse nature, form and sound – far more than scientific analyses − make it clear that the world of symbolic meaning in which we live as cultural beings, that is our everyday life world, is not the real world, that is to say what life is actually about, even though that reality has to be experienced and actualised in it.

3. DISAPPEARANCE OF FIXED CULTURAL POINTS OF REFERENCE

It is common knowledge that the past 150 years have seen unprecedented cultural development in our society, which has grown into a complex whole of systems and subsystems, sectors and subsectors, functions and processes. But reality –I mean listening to reality respectfully – always triggers an experience of something impalpable, inaccessible to any cultural construction of meaning. In our familiar life world, too, with its fixed points of reference we come up against something that resists all cultural usurpation, refusing to be integrated with any socially constructed life world whatever. Something is presupposed in all our cultural activities.

Naturally we must be careful not to lapse into a dualism of two worlds. We cannot approach the presupposition in all our activities *an sich,* bypassing, as it

were, our life world or symbolic world of meaning.[6] But we do experience recalcitrance. What is at issue is what one could call genuine 'exteriority' (E. Levinas) or, more accurately (for the term 'exteriority' may cause confusion), genuine foreignness: something we have not produced through our social construction of manifold totalities. I am speaking about something we have not thought up, that may even be unthinkable, independent of and prior to all our actions. After all, as cultural beings, sometimes as artists, humans do not create *ex nihilo*. We are finite beings; ultimately we come up against frontiers – the frontiers of ourselves as mortals. Human beings can say everything about themselves except "I am a God in my innermost thoughts," as Willem Kloos (1859-1938) mused in the late 19th century.[7]

Especially in a crisis this 'foreignness' pierces our minds like a razor: our cultural life world with its fixed points of reference loses its self-evidence and, in any event, its quality as the meaningful basis of all experienced reality. It loses the quality it acquired in the past: its universally unquestioned, incontrovertible objectivity and plausibility. New experiences of this nature (and I see them expressed in many forms of modern – or is it postmodern? – art) cannot be introjected into our experiential and hermeneutic horizon as addenda, even if it has already been corrected and adapted to some extent, or into the cultural world we live in. The new experience shatters tradition. People do not readily 'appropriate' such radical experiences, for they dare not 'expropriate' themselves by letting go of their familiar world of meaning.[8] In such cases we nonetheless come face to face with reality as something that does not conform to the acting, thinking or artistic subject, that refuses to be integrated with a semiotic system or a preconceived or still to be conceived model or musical theme. What reveals itself to our experience is something that cannot be mastered, which is truly recalcitrant to every grasping human act. Even the limits of our linguistic culture are not the limits of reality. There is a truth 'beyond language'. Nonverbal artworks in particular refer to it – even though in the end we can only communicate about nonverbal art in language.

I think we are living in such a time when, as a result of changes mainly in our complex, fragmented or segmented Western society with its multiplicity of specialisms and autonomous sectors, all our fixed points of reference are

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[6] In the volume edited by E. Kuypers, *Volgens Edward Schillebeeckx* (Leuven/Apeldoorn, 1991), G. De Schrijver comments in passing, to my mind wrongly, that as a theologian I still operate with the 'two worlds' scheme ('Hertaling van het Christusgebeuren: een onmogelijke opgave?', loc. cit. 53-90). In fact that is a theology that I have fought tooth and nail in my lectures and articles, sometimes explicitly using the term 'two-worlds scheme'. Some misinterpretations of my ideas are traceable, I think, to a widespread overestimation of the influence of D. De Petter on my Nijmegen theology, which is actually a fundamental misconception.

[7] W.L. Van Leeuwen & F.G. Stemvers, *Poëzie en Proza*, II, Groningen, [5]1964, 12 (our translation).

[8] B. Waldenfels, *Der Stachel des Fremdes*, Frankfurt-M., 1990, 57-71; cf. D.J. Fasching, *Vreemdeling na Auschwitz*, Zoetermeer, 1995; M. De Certeau, *L'étranger ou l'union dans la différence*, Paris, 1969.

disappearing (quite apart from oppression and exclusion in modern and postmodern society). Many people are totally at a loss, floundering. Our society, politics and institutions have grown too vast, too opaque. That also applies to those churches – nowadays merely components of society – in which authorities become implausible because of mistaken loyalties. Authoritative arguments can no longer drive home familiar, fixed points of reference as they once did; on the contrary, merely invoking authority has the opposite effect and arouses even fiercer opposition. There is widespread frustration because the traditional form of religion has become foreign to the new culture we are living in and, for that reason, culturally irrelevant, no longer speaking to people. That is not remedied by credal appeals (as often happens in Protestant churches), nor by repeated authoritarian, even threatening warnings, prohibitions and bans (as is the case in the Catholic Church)! Still, despite or maybe partly because of secularisation, religion is thriving, albeit to my mind often in para-religious forms. In that case secularisation may alienate people from the institutional church, synagogue, temple or mosque, giving rise to peripheral membership, nonreligiosity and alternative lifestyles; on the other hand its specialised fragmentation drives people towards a new, resurgent 'religiosity' and 'holism' in diverse (sometimes bizarre) directions.

Contemporary art perhaps makes us aware of this state of affairs, far more than cultural sociological, philosophical or theological analyses. "That's not a pipe!" I am convinced that Christian churches and other religions which *fail to use the medium* of humanism, humanitarianism and human solidarity, especially with wounded, beleaguered people, don't stand a chance in our evolving new culture.[9] To Christians living in the emerging culture it is a matter of reflecting the message of grace, salvation and deliverance in a *human form.* Anything that does not conform to the standards of authentic human dignity cannot claim to be Christian or invoke the name of God. Even in my days as a young Dominican theology student I was shocked when I read in a speech by pope Pius XI to the staff of the Angelicum and the Master of' the Dominicans: "Especially in our time one should speak of 'serving the church' rather than of 'serving Jesus Christ'."[10]

A church that does not permit human rights in its own ranks, and thereby mutilates the human face in the name of a God allegedly transcending all

[9] To me that is the challenge of the at least 'agnostic' humanism that is resurfacing, albeit in a different configuration than formerly, in a book like *Humanisme: theorie en praktijk*, P. Cliteur & D. Van Houten (eds), Utrecht, 1993; also see the punchy, more differentiated article by the agnostic J.F. Glastra van Loon, 'Zoektocht naar de zin van het leven: een levensvervulling', in the newspaper *Trouw*, 18 Oct. 1996, 11 (Podium column). A Christian theist like Paul Ricoeur (throughout his oeuvre) would counter this by saying: 'There is meaning in life, but you have to look for it.'

[10] Rendering of a speech by Pius XI to a group of Dominicans, from my notes in my theological study years taken from the newspaper *La Croix* of 12 March 1931, 1 (our translation).

humanity, has reached the end of its road in a culture gasping for genuine humanity: in that respect at any rate it is not a church, and is also not true to the gospel of Jesus Christ in his human manifestation that is the revealed form of the living God. In order to maintain the plausibility of divine transcendence Christian churches must radiate humanity, in terms of their own religious inspiration and as elements of a culture, because to Christians he is a God who cares for people. He is a 'God of human beings', many Old Testament psalms affirm repeatedly. When churches – both their leaders and lay members – do not display a genuinely human, ethical face they forfeit their plausibility as a religion and a religious culture. That is what is happening at present.

People are panting for a culture of justice and love. A human rights culture is a minimum and the beginnings of love, but it's not enough. People long to be accepted unconditionally by others, everyone wants to be accepted for their own sake, be they black, yellow, boss-eyed, handicapped or foreigners. Respect, forgiveness, love and trust are their due. Justice, like the law, is cold and forbidding. A human culture is a culture of love, and that cannot be pinned down in statutes and codified. That is why religious movements and religions, as long as they are not inhumanly alienated from their authentic roots, are among the most dynamic forces in any culture worthy of the name. Without Christian humanity Christianity will carry no weight in future, but without evangelically true Christianity humanity, too, is at risk. Christendom rooted in the gospel of Jesus the Lord, the coming Son of man, is an inexhaustible force field, also for cultural actions aimed at human dignity for everyone, especially for the least among us.

Changes, even discontinuities in our worldview come about mainly when we are confronted with recalcitrance. That is no doubt why the incomprehensible, theoretically and practically intractable recalcitrance of suffering, especially when it is innocent or absurd, plays such a major role in human history and has meaning that we can never pin down in explanatory conceptions. Nowadays it is mainly artistic works that seek to convey that humans are up against an experience of final limits … against discontinuities.

On the threshold of the 21st century we have to recognise this experience of humans as mystery in order to open up our culture to the transcendent mystery of God. If we confine ourselves to permanent horizontal, cultural human self-transcendence, we are still relying on the 19th century belief in progress, which is passé. It would lead to either a kind of nihilism or absolute relativism, or to a rediscovery (even if not mathematically or scientifically compelling) that the mystery in humans reflects the absolute mystery of what the world religions call God.

In a secularised world it is not the experience of final limits per se but examining it in light of major religious experiential traditions – which to many

among us is Christianity – that can help us to hear the good news, retrieving our faith in absolute transcendence; and in the power of that faith we can fearlessly face our final limits and surmount them in prayerful surrender, opening ourselves to the undeserved gift that sets us free.

As we have seen, culture, art and language explore the limits of our finitude to the point of absurdity. It is up to us to transform every possible interpretation to be found in that foreign realm into kindly humanity, imbedded in the mystery of a living God who cares for people, a God who affirms humans in their individuality and therefore stipulates justice and love as the supreme expression of culture and the art of living. No doubt many will miss that interpretation for now, until they miss the Mystery itself. I am quite sure that God's grace and mercy are at work and at a given moment will light up as that which opens up all limits, transcendently accommodating our finite human culture from the depth dimension of all cultures. After all, the reality that Christians designate the 'kingdom of God' is operative all the time – not merely fragmentarily but also as a golden thread of peace and righteousness throughout our history, despite the historical contrary of evil and suffering. It happens wherever God's silent, hidden presence in signs, language and sound surfaces in simple, sometimes supremely noble, brave human conduct: you encountered me when others were forbearing towards you; you encountered me when someone came to visit you on your sickbed; when you stood up for a marginalised or wounded fellow human – then, then you encountered me!

These were the perspectives I had in mind when I kept writing that the gospel message only gets through to us in critical confrontation between the 'past' (the great Christian experiential tradition) and the 'present' (individual and collective new experience). That is why I can't agree with Erik Borgman's statement that "Schillebeeckx in fact still proceeds on the assumption that the faith comes first, the church and its tradition come first, which he can then analyse and demonstrate their openness to the situation of contemporary people".[11] That is in fact what I have fought against with my hermeneutic approach since the 1960s. Certainly (obviously) the *solidified* Christian experiential tradition 'historically predetermines' our present, but it only becomes a living reality in the present, just as 'faith' is never 'objectively predetermined' for the Christian subject. What I didn't produce myself is only *realised* in my present-day religious experience, and highly contextually at that, in a series of fragmentary experiences. I must concede, though (and that may well be Borgman's objection), that so far I have analysed the reciprocal critical reflection between past and present (consciously, for that matter) purely formally: I merely wanted to show the coordinates within which one can theologise fruitfully and plausibly. Others, including Borgman himself, were to

[11] See Borgman, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 359 (our translation).

fill in the territory within those coordinates, and rightly, with concrete, fragmentary contexts. But to that end the system of coordinates first had to be clarified for everybody. At that time it was anything but self-evident! (Today it appears to be an a priori certainty.) Hence it was an essential prolegomenon to what others had to do after me.

Also, when I speak of proportionality in that context it has nothing to do with D. De Petter's epistemological notions of proportion and proportionality, but indicates hermeneutic proportionality, something totally foreign to De Petter's epistemological thought.[12] In fact I see no difference between Borgman's point and what I wrote then and continue to say. The difference, if any, is that I have never gone in for a consciously fragmentary approach, mainly because my interest lay, and still lies, in searching for and disclosing universally human features in fragments of every kind − day-to-day encounters, novels, poems, scientific studies. I continue to believe in the 'great stories', which – like the Bible – comprise a series of highly fragmentary experiences, in which a later author or school of authors saw a sustained plot, and then turned a concatenation of minor histories of people or groups into a 'great story' – to trace a path for those who read that story with some sort of attention. Put differently, I keep looking for the Christian message that addresses all people, and that is only possible if one does not detach current fragmentary experiences from what (the so-called nonreligious) Walter Benjamin, who greatly influenced me in this respect, called the indispensable relevance of the 'great human traditions' to authentic humanity here and now. To my mind contemporary 'fragmentary stories' are merely a new, to me surprising and stimulating, part of these great traditions – in Christian terms, as I continually stress, a kind of 'fifth Gospel', which can make up an extremely variegated picture. But without an underlying continuity in that story (partly on account of many necessary discontinuities that keep the evangelical 'plot' moving) any talk of 'being a Christian' has no authentic meaning. I consider that to be the strength of (substantiated) faith in a major religious experiential tradition. One never starts from scratch, but is part of a long history, which for many entails or signifies rebellion against real-life histories of suffering. That is not the lot of our generation only.

[12] The word 'hermeneutics' never crossed De Petter's lips; that was the source of the conflict between us towards the end of his life. The term 'proportionality', as Borgman points out, derives from J.-P. Jossua; I cited his article explicitly the first time I used the term in my hermeneutics, somewhat reluctantly, because his article was written from an epistemological rather than a hermeneutic perspective.

4. RELATION TO THE TRANSCENDENT AND VIOLENCE

To conclude my reflection, I have to point out a possible danger that always lurks when one sees 'religion', to my mind rightly, as a cultural form of divine salvation. Here ideological misinterpretation and abuse are a real hazard. The fact that religion itself, the concrete embodiment of both our relationship with Ultimate Transcendence and Ultimate Immanence, is part of culture is a caveat urging extreme caution.

If culture – both its horizontal and vertical (or depth) dimension of self-transcendence – is a ground-breaking movement in history, one immediately faces the phenomenon of violence, which therefore raises far more frequent objections than the introduction of the concept of transcendence (or the ultimate) into an exposition of our earthly culture. A glance at human history makes these objections painfully clear.

The sense of superiority that religions – and Christianity is no exception – have regularly displayed appears to be one of the greatest obstacles to the coexistence of diverse religions within the same political boundaries. That is increasingly evident in our time; thus Muslims and Buddhists, for example, daily rub shoulders with Christian neighbours. Such a sense of superiority poses a threat to a culture of human dignity. We must therefore own up to the history of encounters between religions – actually, between religious people – that have given rise to so much inhuman violence for the sake of an 'ideal' or 'great' cause, a professed 'only' truth, a specific religious relation to the Ultimate.

When we scrutinise this historical reality the question comes to mind whether there is an *intrinsic relation* between the essence of religion (i.e. a relationship with the transcendent, immanent Ultimate) and religious violence. If that is not so (which is my thesis), then the historical facts of interreligious encounter almost automatically raise a second question: is religion with its affirmation of truth not in fact packaged in all manner of nonreligious preconceptions, or covertly assimilated into a particular, false self-understanding? Such an entanglement betrays the innermost dynamics of an authentic relationship with the Ultimate, including a personal Christian or evangelical one, and as a result it turns violent.

Reading the sermon on the mount, 'Blessed are the meek and those who strive for righteousness…', one asks oneself how the history of Christianity could possibly have been so profoundly disfigured by religious violence, the more so because we Christians worship the living God, who (so we confess) seeks to be a God of people − not of the dead but of the living, a God about whom even the Judaic roots of Christianity aver that he abominates human sacrifice (Lev 18:21-30, 20:1-5).

To some extent this contradiction between the behaviour of religious people and their relation to the Ultimate is humanly understandable. If religion is the supreme value in your life, as theists experience according to their self-understanding and may rightly profess, then any theoretical or practical abuse of that faith leads to the most inhuman cruelty. Here, too, corruption of the finest is the rock bottom of evil. In the course of history wars have been fought and people have been killed in the name of God. Modern people who, many religious wars later, try to rationalise the problem often have difficulty accommodating a qualification such as 'understandably' and then, wrongly, conclude that there must be an intrinsic relation between religion and violence. I say, wrongly. On the other hand we cannot refute the allegation by trivialising the historical connection or reducing it to the weakness and inconsistency of believers. The perplexing fact that great, intrinsically tender-hearted theologians, including Thomas Aquinas, were children of their times and theologically legitimised violence, indicates that it is not so simple, especially not for people who experience their relationship with the absolute or incomprehensible mystery as the core of their existence: a matter of life and death.

I do not dwell on the thesis (nonetheless memorable) of a thinker like M. Merleau-Ponty, who saw religious violence as an unavoidable concomitant, inherent in religion. To this kind of atheism a relationship with the ultimate, the absolute, spells the death of everything relative and contingent, also of human autonomy. Many atheists and agnostics, notably humanists, also regard this view as outdated. While it no longer disfigures the praxis, it still mars the soul of most religions. Thomas expresses it forcefully in his doctrine of creation, which in effect says that the act of creation situates people in their human, albeit finite, autonomy and leaves them freely responsible for their ethical behaviour in this world and for their autonomous search for ethical criteria for their behaviour. God instated them in their proudly human personal rights; anyone who touches these touches God himself, says Thomas.[13] In principle this, quite rightly, subjects every religion to the critique of human dignity, on both humanitarian and Christian grounds. An authentic relation to the absolute or ultimate is in no way violent – on the contrary: it engenders intrepid courage to bring greater humanity to every domain of life.

The trouble is that the relation to the ultimate is never 'isolated': to believers nothing human escapes our creaturely bond with the ultimate. From our point of view the 'direct' bond with God is also invariably mediated. Clearly that allows for all sorts of healthy associations − but also for false ones – between religious people and 'profane' mediations when these are elevated above their

[13] 'Detrahere perfectioni creaturarum est detrahere perfectioni divinae virtutis' (Thomas, *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 69).

proper status and arbitrarily upgraded to 'God's will'. For then misguided alliances can incite them to religious violence in the name of their relationship with the ultimate.

Hence I see the problem of religious violence – including intolerance towards other religions and rejection of interreligious dialogue on an equal footing – as the only proper and necessary framework for posing the question concerning the true character of Christianity and of Jesus confessed as the Christ. Otherwise the answer to a painful, challenging question is diplomatically glossed over and becomes a civil gesture of religio-political gentility, formal courtesy towards the other. The real issue is whether the professed relationship with the ultimate, the transcendent – the 'mystery' – liberates or endangers humanity. From a human and Christian point of view, is violence in the name of religion essentially evil? I think it is, and want to show why. In so doing I realise that my answer entails a critical question about our traditional interpretation of Christianity's so-called claim to absoluteness, as well as Judaic and Christian concepts like predestination and covenant. I appreciate that this must lead to the conclusion that the notion of divine predestination includes 'mediation' but not anti-human partiality, hence can only be aimed at universality, not exclusion. That implies that predestination and covenant are subordinate to God's intention for creation, which is aimed at salvation for all people: *all humankind is God's chosen people.* All historical forms of belief in religious predestination must promote the belief in universal predestination; otherwise the self-understanding of individuals, nations and religious communities as being divinely chosen entails a danger of violence against adherents of other religions or 'unbelievers', which can result in a cauldron of violence.

Religious violence, hence also rejection of interreligious dialogue on an equal footing, has a dual basis of a nonreligious (and un-Christian) nature. The first has to do with professing to be the only true religion. In that case other religions will be consistently denied any right to exist, and in variegated societies such a refutation is in itself a virtual declaration of war, hence of violence. Religion, including Christianity, is subject to critique from a religious hermeneutics that 'does justice' to people on humanitarian grounds and, to believers, on Christian religious grounds of belief in creation. But the two bases cannot be aggregated as two separate ingredients. Humanity, human dignity is the *immediate ground* of human ethics (*etsi Deus non daretur*), and to Christian believers this is grounded in God's creation, which, being transcendently immanent, is ultimate or religious and not on a par with humanitarian grounds.[14] From this structure it follows that within the ambit of the

[14] Still, what constitutes human dignity here and now can only be determined democratically if

autonomous sphere there are traces of this religious transcendence, at any rate if that which appears to be ethically 'humane' is also scrutinised in light of a given religious experiential tradition – to Christians the Judaeo-Christian tradition. There is no immediate self-evidence; here, too, the *redundance* of religious transcendence in human ethics only becomes apparent in light of a human religious tradition.[15] To Christians this insight implies that they cannot and may not interpret their confession of Jesus the Christ to mean that compared to other religions Christianity is the only true faith.

Even if one's own religion is not regarded as the only true one, a second pretention can cause religion to turn to violence. This second basis of religious violence is the belief that one's own religion is one's primary civic duty on the grounds that the God one confesses is the direct guarantor of the welfare of human society. This notion, even if it lays no claim to the absoluteness of that religion, also leads to religious violence. Even if a religion acknowledges that it is only one of many religions, it may still instigate violence because of diverse overt or covert alliances, hence because of an implicitly distorted God concept.

History offers many arguments to support this. It is evident in the classical concept of *religio* as defined in Roman law. *Religio* was the first, supreme patriotic or civic duty (*pietas*), any deviation being qualified as subversive and severely punished,[16] even though the Hellenistic Roman pantheon accommodated many kinds of gods. Despite this tolerant pantheon the early Christians were persecuted, since in the eyes of Latin-Hellenistic law they were 'a-theists', hence subversive because of their denial of the divine guarantee of the wellbeing of the Roman empire, thereby failing in their primary civic duty.[17] If, as in the Roman law concerning *religio* as a primary civic duty, one forges a direct link between the established or, alternatively, per se revolutionary socio-political order and a relationship with the ultimate as the guarantee of the established (or revolutionary) reason of state, interreligious, hence anti-human violence is a logically consistent outcome. In that case it was not even appreciated that such religious violence was 'inhuman', for in this

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everyone has a say in it; and even then democracy inevitably includes pluralism. Hence we need to apply criteria. See the problem of the struggle between the Right and the Good in J. Rawls, *A theory of justice,* Oxford, ²1973.

[15] Here I am reacting to the view of G. Steiner, *Von realer Gegenwart: Hat unser Sprechen lnhalt?* München, 1990 (original English: *Real presences*), who professes to discern an immediate presence of the transcendent in aesthetics (and human ethics). I deny the reality of that immediate perception when it is said that it can happen without an accompanying, mediatory recollection of a pre-existent religious tradition. Here I share the criticism of both D. Mieth and J. Kuschel, in: *Theologie und ästhetische Erfahrung: Beiträge zur Begegnung von Religion und Kunst*, Hg. W. Lesh, Stuttgart, 1993, 111-124, 145-165.

[16] P. Stockmeier, *Glaube und Religion in der frühen Kirche,* Freiburg, 1972.

[17] J. Vogt, *Zur Religiosität der Christenverfolger im Romischen Reich,* Heidelberg, 1962; Th. Ulrich, *Pietas (pius) als politischer Begriff im Romischen Staate bis zum Tode des Kaisers Commodus,* Breslau, 1930; N. Brox, 'Zum Vorwwrf des Atheismus gegen die alte Kirche', in: *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift,* 74 (1966,) 274-282.

view human beings, quite apart from their relationship with the ultimate, were even more inextricably enmeshed in all kinds of slavery and violence.

In the 4th century, in the latter days of the Roman empire, when Christianity became the official religion, the church adopted the Roman concept of *religio* (along with the associated concept of *Roma*) and applied it to the Christian relationship with the ultimate. In this way the Christian God became (in the West for centuries) the upholder of the established socio-political order, with all it implied for those considered dissident, 'heretical' or 'schismatic'. For according to this view all deviant ideas were simply lese-majesty.[18] That also allowed civil authorities to punish 'Christian heretics'. Thus reason of state stood four square behind the council that condemned Arius, because to the emperor anti-Arian dogma was the strongest weapon in his striving for the unity of the empire. Thus Arianism became subversive. Subsequently the church's adoption of the ancient Roman concept of *religio* permitted the Crusades, in which Muslims were slaughtered, and the Inquisition, in which dissidents from orthodoxy – the guarantee of political wellbeing – were handed over to the civil authorities as traitors and burnt at the stake.

In such cases religious violence is not rooted (exclusively) in a religion's claim – in this instance that of Christian churches – to being the only true faith, but in the false assumption that the religious relationship with the ultimate implies an essential connection with the concrete, humanly established socio-political order to which one belongs, in other words that the Christian God, for example, is the immediate guarantor of that order and hence of the wellbeing of the empire (*sa1us nationis,* the 'supreme law', guaranteed by God himself). The flipside is that not being a Christian is potentially subversive. After all, even tolerant modern states intervene forcibly to combat potentially treasonable elements and activities. Hence not the Christian religion as such but its association with the classical concept of *religio* accounts for its historical record of religious violence, as well as the historical fact that even critical theologians had no difficulty legitimising such violence.

The theological conclusion for us modern people is crystal clear: there is something wrong with the preconception that a relationship with the ultimate is associated with upholding an established order or (as a real, if less common alternative) with a directly religious summons to revolt. Put differently, directly linking the ultimate with a given (established or revolutionary) socio-political order is essentially to abuse religion and is therefore humanly and

[18] *Codex Theod.*, XVI, 1, 2; XIV 2, 25. See P. Stockmeier, 'Das Schwert im Dienst der Kirche: Zur Hinrichtung Priszillians in Trier', in: *Festschrift für A. Thomas,* Trier, 1967, 415-428; also see notes 16 and 17. The adoption of *religio,* already obliquely discernible in emperor Galerius's edict of tolerance in 311, is abundantly evident in emperor Theodosius the Great's law on religion (28 February 380).

Christianly unacceptable. In my view that makes an actual 'state religion' anti-human and potentially violent. That applies equally to state recognition of a few privileged 'official religions', excluding or merely tolerating others (thought this still begs the question in how far religions in their relation with what they call the ultimate in fact liberate or threaten humanity).

Hence quite apart from theological and evangelical arguments it is unacceptable and discriminatory, also on humanitarian ethical grounds, to posit a direct relation between a religion and a given socio-political order. At its very core such a claim implies violation of human rights and therefore, in religious terms, rights grounded in God's creation. In a pluralist society it is tantamount to a declaration of war, that is to say, violence. This is not to deny what I have consistently pointed out, namely that the gospel is socio-politically relevant; it only refutes the existence of a *direct, intrinsic* link between the Christian confession of God and a humanly established or to be established socio-political order. Rejection of such a direct link moreover offers scope for Christians to engage in interreligious dialogue on an equal footing with all dialogue partners in the face of real religious differences and rejection of the view that all religions are 'equal' (known as indifferentism).

In reality Christianity is only reluctantly bidding the two forms of distorted religious self-understanding farewell, and then mainly under external social pressure, more especially from the modern secularised world − a *Fremdprophetie* from which Christian churches can learn a great deal! Yet the pressure is salutary, even though it is imperative to keep looking for intrinsically religious, Christian grounds for non-violent religion and open interreligious dialogue, and for a distinctively Christian positive attitude towards religious people of other persuasions. But that analysis falls outside the scope of this article.

Chapter 8

TOWARDS A REDISCOVERY OF THE CHRISTIAN SACRAMENTS:
Ritualising religious elements in daily life

INTRODUCTION

Since Vatican II sacramental liturgical practice has assumed widely divergent forms. In some countries (including the Netherlands) the verbal aspect of the liturgy, denoted by the traditional patristic term *legomenon*, rooted in the Hellenistic mysteries – I would render it with 'ministry of the word': verbal expressions – is much accentuated. At the same time the aspect indicated by the equally ancient word *drômenon* – festive, even dramatic enactments forming an expressive whole of gestures, postures, rhythmic movements, 'doing something' with substances like water, oil or incense in an ambience of music, hymns and moments of silence, light and space – is kept subdued, sometimes eclipsed by treating these things as inessential extras. Elsewhere, for instance in Africa and Latin America, liturgy is embedded in the indigenous culture and is expressed realistically in a recognisable, enthusiastic ritual performance that acts as an identity-forming force throughout the celebrating community. In the first case one could call it 'Protestant-isation', resulting in a purely verbal, sometimes cerebral liturgy, which evokes unorthodox connotations. In the second case the central curial authority in Rome greets these enthusiastic celebrations with a certain hesitancy and transparent forms of constraint. This at a time when these Catholic peoples often interweave their animated, serio-playful festive celebrations with archaic religious images that were once familiar – although, one might ask, for how long still?

A truly harmonious blend of *legomenon* and *drômenon*, or word and gesture, is not easily achieved. To my mind that is understandable after so many centuries of stagnation of liturgic creativity, which has been curbed in Catholic churches ever since the Council of Trent. Only recently Vatican II liberated liturgy from its fixation on rigid adherence to formulas and gestures, and brought some flexibility. The scope this opened up unleashed a fervour that

led, in some instances, to an impetuous approach that was hardly justifiable, either liturgically or theologically – counter to the still modest intentions of Vatican II. But no one can be blamed for the fact that a harmonious balance in current sacramental, liturgical practice cannot be taken for granted at this stage. Accusations in this regard, particularly if directed to the proponents of liturgical innovation, I consider plainly unfair.

Whilst Christianity may be a school of wisdom, it is not a philosophical institution. Besides the dogmatic tradition, which transmits the substance of the Christian faith through catechesis, and in addition to an authoritative tradition, an academic-theological, a popularising-theological and a folk-theological transmission of faith, there are other ways in which the Christian gospel fans out in all sorts of traditions. The first that comes to mind is the biblical stories depicted in mosaics, sculptures and paintings in old churches, basilicas and cathedrals, thus familiarising the faithful with the principal stories of the first and second testaments – for many of them their sole access to biblical history, with its message, inspiration and orientation. Nor should one forget the mystagogy from the time of the church fathers, which, for all that, remained firmly focused on knowledge, instruction in the practice and the mystically charged experience of the sacraments of initiation: baptism, chrismation or confirmation, and the eucharist. Thirdly, there are the vitally important experiential and religious practices that are carried on the tides of the church's 'liturgical seasons'.

These ritual, liturgical expressions of religious belief are what the Christian sacraments are about, expressing and passing on a shared religious identity. But to many believers these expressions are now in crisis, a crisis so acute that many have turned their backs on sacramental practice.

1. ARCHAIC RELIGIOUS IMAGES DETER BELIEVERS FROM JOINING IN LITURGIC CELEBRATIONS

In my experience many marginal Catholics cite, as their main reason for distancing themselves from the institutional church and its sacramental practices, all sorts of outdated religious images, which are dictated ever more categorically by ecclesiastic decree the more scepticism about them grows among believers; yet *as images* they stem from another age and are hard to affirm rationally today. I think this motive is closer to the truth than the oft repeated charge of secularisation, even though the latter, on account of its own acquired truths, has an indirect bearing on the issue. Archaic religious images cause many people to experience sacraments as things that have become irrelevant.

One of the axioms of traditional sacramental theology is that the sacraments are intrinsically efficacious, at any rate for those who put no

impediment or obstacle (*obex*) in the way of these gifts from God. But in our time a major obstacle to church attendance and active participation in what happens there, liturgical celebration, is that many people no longer have any meaningful conception of what they would actually be celebrating. To many people in our late modern era some of the images and concepts that have been used over the ages to articulate the Christian content of the gospel have become irrelevant, incomprehensible, even absurd. So what does one celebrate?

Nowadays religious concepts and images of God conflict fiercely. To clarify the point I need merely summarise some of the questions with which believers confront me. How can one seriously claim that the whole world was saved by the historically fortuitous death of one individual? To which some feminists would add: 'and a man to boot!' How can one talk of God's kingdom of peace when, at the end of twenty centuries of Christianity, we have lived through two world wars, seen holocausts on an unprecedented scale, as well as any number of massive ethnic cleansings in various parts of the world, in which Christian were and are involved? Moreover, the innumerable images that people have of, or ascribe to, heaven and hell have meant that to many these have become mere fables, in comparison with which the Santa Claus festivities, intended for children, seem more comprehensible and rather more plausible. What Christianity calls, to my mind correctly, the 'divinity' of the man Jesus is represented in the minds of many believers by images like: 'Look! Here God in person walked at the Sea of Tiberias or Gennesareth, and over there he stepped into the boat'. All such metaphoric terms referring to religious realities have lost their self-evident character; many people no longer perceive anything meaningful in them. Yet *that which is expressed* by such terms as God, Jesus the Messiah, Son of God, kingdom of God, salvation, redemption, reconciliation, et cetera is real to every Christian. This is the reality that all Christian sacraments are essentially about, unless one experiences them as a popular potpourri, something like a carnival, which one can perhaps still value as a human 'safety valve'.

The *obex* or obstacle to fruitful, salvific sacramental celebration is present in late modern churchgoers themselves even before they enter the church for mass. The *legomenon*, the verbalised message, has lost its comprehensible meaning even before that. And the uncomprehended *legomenon* presages the death of the accompanying *drômenon*, the whole liturgy, for that literally means the dramatic performance or enactment of a liturgic scenario, which I shall spell out in more detail in a postscript to this chapter. If a sacrament no longer 'says' or 'does' anything to believers, it becomes pointless, even if every rubric is meticulously followed. 'What's the use?' I heard a twelve-year-old girl say in the United States after a Sunday mass, which struck me, too, as pretty well

meaningless, with its accompanying banal talk on video tape, even though it was all conducted precisely and punctiliously according to the official rules; but there was no bond with the communicants, no inspiration, just a vacuous routine.

This situation shows that a misconception of the faith – whether because of poor preaching, misunderstanding of the proclamation, intra-church polarisation, as a pervasive criticism of church policy, or for whatever reason – can in the long run become an insuperable hurdle to joining in liturgic 'performances' where hardly any of the script that is being performed still makes sense, in which people experience nothing that orients or inspires them or keeps them going. Let's be honest: that is the situation of many Western Christians today. And I want to add: the situation (at least in itself) has nothing to do with a decline in religious feeling among Christian believers, as some (counter to realistic studies) persist in maintaining with naively candid ingenuousness. The very people (lay people and pastors, or whatever you choose to call them) who still try to do something about the problem are singled out as scapegoats: they are said to be the cause of the flagging of Christian religious feeling (and if they do not get the blame, then their theologians do).

I want to state explicitly that I advocate a lifestyle nourished by the sacraments as a distinctive form of religious experience, but at the same time I object to publications that, in justifiable reaction against intellectualistic explanations of the sacraments, do not allow for the distinction (not rigidly enforceable but nonetheless real) between 'faith', including its knowable content, and religious images. Thus visualising (bodily) resurrection as the raising *of the deceased body* in no way reflects the Christian meaning of the raising of the dead or human eschatological salvation, for that includes spiritualised corporeality as human salvation. The face or the eyes of an animal, however touching and endearing, are not the same as a human facial expression, in which matter is spiritualised. What, then, would be the spiritual facial expression of a dead person who has been taken up and sanctified by God? Any images we may form of it are inappropriate, but their religious implications become intelligible if they point to the Mystery that will befall people as fully human beings! That is why our religious tradition emphasises that people's Christian salvation necessarily includes the body. Tertullian already harped on it: 'The body is the pivot of salvation' (*Caro, salutis est cardo*);[1] or, in modern terms, people, in all their sensory corporeality, are the vital link, the hub, the pivot of everything when it comes to true salvation and bliss. In this regard, commenting on the resurrection texts in 1 Corinthians 15, Thomas Aquinas dared say: 'My soul is not "I", my ego cannot be reduced to

[1] Tertullian, *De resurrectione mortuorum*, VIII, 6-7: PL 2, col. 806.

"my soul"'.[2] From a Christian perspective human salvation is not salvation of souls, as some spiritual gurus keep insisting; it is bliss that befalls us in our full spiritual corporeality or embodied spirit. People are certainly not angels with material bodies, they are not incarnated angelic spirits, but their spirits are corporeal and their bodies are spiritual. This is not dualism but two dimensions of the one human being. In order to understand the resurrection and sacramental celebrations this sensitive, expressive corporeality is of cardinal importance: it is the *cardo* or pivot of salvation.

In this regard it should be noted that religious content, the soul and dynamo of every form of Christian rituality, is never found in isolation, on its own (hence 'culture-less' or transcending all cultural roots). Believers' relation to the changeable cultural present always enters into the substance of their faith. That is why every form of dogmatism, even when it assumes the hermeneutic form of neo-orthodoxy, is an *obex* or obstacle to sacramental praxis. That is also why the Christian faith can survive in troubled times, not merely through superficial, homogeneously evolving continuity but also by way of ruptures, for humans are by nature (hence also as believers) cultural, historical conditioned beings. This applies to both religious individuals and religious institutions. In their faith in God or religion Christians are never outside or above the culture in which they live. Temporality is part and parcel of our humanity. That is why religious images may be experienced as outdated from time to time.[3] Christian faith is not possible outside or beyond culture. What is commonly known as 'orthodoxy' is in fact Christian faith, albeit articulated in highly specific, culturally conditioned conceptions and images of humankind and the world: a world from a bygone cultural era. In the process a particular cultural era from the past is wrongfully declared the norm or the 'golden age', which effectively makes the notions prevalent in those times heterodox in our day, counter to all sorts of (I trust) sincere intentions.

The Christian faith is situated in history and is embedded, moreover, in diverse cultures; even within the same cultural tradition there may be variations in periods and in interpretation. Hence Christian religion can refer to the Absolute only in a historically relative way: it refers to absolute truth in the sense of pointing to that which transcends every concretely historical articulation.

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[2] 'Anima autem, cum sit pars corporis hominis, non est totus homo, et anima mea non est ego': Thomas, *Super 1 ad Cor.*, c. 15, lect. II (*Super epistolas S. Pauli Apostoli lectura*, ed. R. Cai, 1, Turin/Rome, 1953, no. 924).

[3] See E. Schillebeeckx, 'Breuken in christelijke dogma's', in: *Breuklijnen: Grenservaringen en zoektochten*, Baarn, 1994, 15-49; for a translation of this article cf. ch. 5 of this book; L. Boeve, *Onderbroken traditie: Heeft het christelijk verhaal nog toekomst?*, Kapellen, 1999; L. Oosterveen, 'Tussen band en breuk: De theologische verhouding tot de christelijke traditie', in: *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 39 (1999), 217-227; Cf. D. Speed Thompson, *The language of dissent: Edward Schillebeeckx on the crisis of authority in the Catholic Church*, Notre Dame/Ind., 2003.

2. REACTIONS TO THE BREACH BETWEEN ANTHROPOLOGY AND THEOLOGY IN TRADITIONAL AND MODERN SACRAMENTAL DOCTRINE

1. Reactions in theology and in empirical science (including the Ritual Studies 'school')

As far back as the 1950s hylomorphism (i.e. the interpretation of the sacraments in terms of the Aristotelian distinction between matter and form) came in for serious criticism from Karl Rahner and myself. We did not reject the familiar, traditional terminology out of hand but criticised it, especially the way canon law narrowed it down by linking isolated formulas with the punctilious use of elements such as water or oil. At that time Rahner, on the basis of his 'transcendental' philosophical and theological orientation, stressed that an adequate interpretation called for more extensive use of philosophical anthropology. For my part, inspired by the then current phenomenology of, inter alia, G. Gusdorf and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I adopted a phenomenological/anthropological approach to symbolic activity or metaphoric acts. Since then the positive sciences have presented new analyses and theories of rituals from various angles of ethno-anthropology and folklore, some scholars also incorporating the already familiar linguistic insights of what is known as semiotics.

Louis-Marie Chauvet followed the course marked out by Rahner and myself, modifying and refining the theory of symbolic acts.[4] Since then many others have taken this route, so that by now this trend is fairly widely accepted; in the Netherlands developments in the (mainly Catholic) theology of sacraments between 1950 and 1991 were thoroughly surveyed by a Protestant scholar, M.E. Brinkman, in a study of creation and sacraments.[5] Unfortunately, however, his study was confined to the problem as defined at that time and the corrections already contributed by Rahner, myself and Chauvet.

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[4] L.-M. Chauvet, *Symbole et sacrament: Une relecture sacramentelle de l'existence chrétienne*, Paris, 1987; *Du symbolique au symbole: Essai sur les sacraments*, Paris, 1979; 'La structuration de la foi dans les célébrations sacramentelles', in: *La Maison-Dieu* 174 (1988), 75-96; 'L'avenir du sacramentel', in: *Rech. Sc. Relig.* 75 (1987), 241-266; 'Le sacrifice de la messe: Représentation et expiation', in: *Lum. et vie* 29 (1980), 69-106; 'La ritualité chrétienne dans le cercle infernal du symbole', in: *La Maison-Dieu* 133 (1978), 31-77; 'Sacrements', in: *Catholicisme: Hier, Aujourd'hui, Demain*, 13, Paris, 1993, col. 326-361; 'L'Eglise fait l'Eucharistie, l'Eucharistie fait l'Eglise', in: *Catéchèse* 71 (1978), 178-180; 'Le sacramentologue aux prises avec l'eucharistie', in: *La Maison-Dieu* 137 (1979), 65-70; 'Liturgie et prière: Eléments de réflexion anthropologique, théologique et pratique', ib. 195 (1993), no. 3, 49-90.
[5] M.E. Brinkman, *Schepping en sacrament: Een oecumenische studie naar de reikwijdte van het sacrament als heilzaam symbool in een weerbarstige werkelijkheid*, Zoetermeer, 1991.

A more fundamental reaction came from the empirical sciences, inter alia from what is known as Ritual Studies.

In the 19th and the first half of the 20th century ethnographic studies of ritual concentrated mainly on traditional rites, which were consistently limited to, and identified with, religious rituals. In addition empirical researchers at that time, insofar as they were Christians, worked on the assumption that rites were phenomena pertaining to nature religions and fertility cults – 'pagan' religions – whereas Christian rites had a distinctive, unique character and were given the exclusive name of 'sacraments'. Christians who studied rituals of other religions usually judged these from a Christian perception of sacraments; studies by non-Christians of the same ethnographic material often arrived at very different conclusions. By the same token Christian sacraments were studied on the basis of certain biases against the Christian understanding of what inspired sacramental rituals. Both approaches assumed, moreover, that rites had originated in an irretrievably distant past, and that modern ritualising or rites-in-the-making could not exist, hence were inconceivable. Thus ritual creativity appeared to be a contradiction in terms: rituals, it was thought, were inviolable, sacred, and that was an immutable fact for all time. Various elements from early studies by scholars like Mircea Eliade, James George Frazer, Carl Gustav Jung and Paul Tillich strengthened researchers' conviction that rites and symbols, as they were known, 'could not be generated': they were ancient, unalterable certainties, leaving no room for new rituals.

A new generation of researchers in ethnology and cultural anthropology--assisted by what semiotics, folklore studies and linguistics had produced in the meantime, and by the expertise of modern electronic information science--approaches the material from a very different angle. These scientists have discovered that contemporary TV commercials, for example, are crammed with ritualisations, that is rites-in-the-making, which are part and parcel of our late or 'post'-modern age. This new generation deliberately uses the terms 'ritual' and 'rituality' to indicate a new approach to what used to be known simply as rites; thus they speak of the 'study of ritual' and look for 'ritual as such', being a theoretical model or construction shared by all forms of profane and religious rituals as a specific form of behaviour or action. The term is meant to accentuate a distinctive, new interest in rituals, for they are asking different questions from their predecessors. Within this new scholarly trend there is a small group of researchers who regularly collaborate and to some extent set themselves apart from their colleagues by using a new technical term: 'Ritual Studies' (more specific than the general term 'study of ritual', although it is not easy to demarcate the field). I find these researchers to be on the whole quite cautious and modest, in the sense that they are less inclined to pronounce categorically on new insights. Actually they are not bound by any

normative consensus, neither in their theorising nor in their assessment of empirical data. The only idea they consider to be beyond all doubt is that ritual is one of the ways in which people structure and interpret their worldly environment. But in this new approach many ideas from earlier generations, especially from the 19th and early 20th century, continue to feature in one way or another, albeit in a new framework, along with insights from phenomenology, functionalism, semiotics and structuralism. One early study in particular, dating back to 1966, of ritual in human and animal behaviour was an eye-opener to many of them.[6]

Some years ago these researchers – sometimes called ritualists, even rituologists – concluded that there is a highly suggestive and fruitful distinction between rites in the sense of existing traditional rituals or ritual systems (which were previously conceived of almost exclusively as religious rites) and ritualisation, implying processes of rites in the making.[7]

For the past decade, then, empirical scientists have been researching and analysing rituals, irrespective of whether these were magical or religious or, for example, ritual eating customs. Thus their work is indisputably a new contribution to the understanding of 'ritual as such', a construct which, while abstract in itself, helps to 'explain' a number of phenomena. Christian liturgists and theologians, too, can make use (with due regard to the requirements of

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[6] A discussion on ritualization of behavior in animals and man, ed. J. Huxley, in: *Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London* (Series B, New York/Cambridge) 251 (1966), 247-525.

[7] The use of the term 'ritualising process' stems from J. Huxley (see previous foonote). Theoretically this has had a beneficial impact on the work of two theorists, both of whom also did empirical research: Ronald L. Grimes, professor at the University of Waterloo, Canada, and founder of the *Journal of Ritual Studies*, and the more circumspect Catherine Bell, associate professor at Santa Clara University, California. Grimes's main studies were: *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, rev. ed., Columbia (South Carol.), 1995; 'Reinventing rituals', in: *Soundings* 75 (1992), no. 2, 21-41; 'Emerging ritual', in: *Proceedings of the North American Academy of Liturgy*, 1990, 15-31. C. Bell's principal works are: *Ritual theory, Ritual practice,* New York/Oxford, 1992, and *Ritual: perspectives and dimensions,* ib. 1997. I also mention the long famous inspirer of many other scholars, V.W. Turner, whose numerous publications drew my attention to the new trend in the study of ritual: *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual,* Ithaca, 1970; *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure,* Chicago/London, 1969, Ithaca N.Y., 1977; *From ritual to theatre: the human seriousness of play,* New York, 1982; *Celebrations: studies in festivity and ritual,* ib. 1982; *The drums of affliction: a study of religious processes among the Ndembu of Zambia* (new edition), Ithaca N.Y., 1981 (Oxford, [1]1968); *Process, performance, and pilgrimage: a study in comparative symbology,* New Delhi, 1979; 'Symbolic studies', in: *Ann. Rev. of Anthropology* 4 (1975), 145-161; 'Process, system and symbol: a new anthropological synthesis', in: *Daedalus* 106 (1977), no. 3, 61-80; *The ritual process,* New York, 1982 ([1]1969); *Forms of symbolic action,* Seattle, [2]1971; *Dramas, fields, and metaphors: symbolic action in human society,* Ithaca N.Y., 1974; *Revelation and divinisation in Ndembu ritual,* Ithaca N.Y./London, 1957; 'Worship and ritual in Christianity and other religions', in: *Studia Missionalia* (Rome) 23 (1974), 11-21; *The anthropology of performance,* New York, [2]1986 (copy text from the 1st ed.); *The anthropology of experience,* ed. V. Turner/E.M. Bruner, Urbana, 1986. I also refer to the main authors who introduced modifications and corrections to Turner's work: R.A. Rappaport, E. Erikson, S. Jeyaraja Tambiah & R. Schechner. A book considered important by some scholars – J.M. Greer, *Circles of power: ritual magic in the Western tradition,* St. Paul (Minnesota), 1997 – is extremely interesting but somewhat esoteric.

interdisciplinary scholarship[8]) of their clear methods and criteria to trace the origin or birth of postmodern rites. This in fact clarifies the structure and origin of traditional rites, which previously were thought to have vanished behind the hazy horizon of a distant past. Nowadays we are no longer looking for the prehistoric origin(s) of ancient rituals. The focus has shifted to the immediate 'roots' or living matrix of rituals. And these origins are not in some distant past and are no longer sought in 'primitive cultures' (the very term is no longer accepted by these scholars of Ritual Studies), but in the here and now of what is known as live performance. Current scientific interest in rites can be ascribed to the recognition that 'ritualising', the emergence of rituals, entails trying to discover how the preconscious, latent process that gives rise to ritual behaviour is triggered and develops.

Until quite recently myths and rites tended to have a bad or unfavourable connotation among some scientists. Rituals were identified almost exclusively with religious rituals. And in a world where, to many, God has disappeared from the scene, it was thought that the end of rituals, too, was looming on the horizon. But Ritual Studies show that the distaste for concepts (and realities) like myths and rites has proved to be a judgment based on a relative perception from the perspective of a particular worldview. It has also become clear that religious rites are only one segment in a far broader ritual spectrum. All rituals, both profane and religious, have their 'matrix' in our biophysical corporeality. Let us first look into this more closely.

In the 19th century and until the 1960s philosophers of religion debated endlessly about what came first in religious practice: myths (religious contents and their images) or rites. At the time my own position was that the two formed a complex whole: religious content (with its variable interpretations) and sacramental or ritual praxis, in its ritual form, are inseparable. I still stand by that, with a slight yet significant shift in emphasis: biologically, after all, ritual appears to precede myth. From documentaries on animal behaviour TV viewers know that in the animal world rituals already play an important role in the search for contact, in the area of their many forms of communication with one another. This occurs in animal communication of love and procreation, of hunting and killing their prey, and also of birth, sickness and death. Ritual has to do with the need to communicate. In the great cosmic evolutionary scheme the phenomenon of ritual among animals had long been

[8] Cf. A.K. Giri, 'Boundaries of disciplines. A reconsideration of theories and methods, in: *Conc.* 35 (1999) 2, 64-71; S. Bauman, *Hermeneutics and social science: Approaches to understanding,* London, 1978; Cl. Boff, *Theology and praxis: epistemological foundations,* New York, 1987 (originally in French, a doctoral thesis, mainly on interdisciplinary study, at the Faculty of Theology, Louvain). Compare these studies with: J.A. van der Ven, 'Op weg naar een empirische theologie', in: *Meedenken met Edward Schillebeeckx,* ed. H. Häring e.a., Baarn, 1983, 93-114 (and his many subsequent publications on this subject), and *De theologie uitgedaagd: Spreken over God binnen het wetenschapsbedrijf,* ed. R. Van den Brandt/R. Plum, Zoetermeer, 1999 (especially the article by E. Borgman, 129-165).

an innate and acquired behavioural pattern - before this same pattern arose in the part of the animal world that eventually evolved into human beings. On the basis of their 'spiritual bodies' or 'corporeal spirits' human beings inspire the equally human 'spontaneous' rituals through myths or other forms of religious or profane beliefs that become the carriers of human ritual behaviour.

Empirical scientific studies show that already at the animal level rites start with a process of ritualising everyday occurrences, in which recurrent behavioural patterns become stylised and fixed in symbolic movements (gestures and posturing), accompanied by communicative sounds. In the animal world ritual behaviour ultimately serves biological, bio-psychological and socio-biological needs, but through stylisation and repetition certain actions become 'symbolic' even among animals, in codes that are intelligible to members of that species. If one looks only for immediate efficacy, then symbolic, ritually stylised actions in themselves are irrelevant, dysfunctional. The meaning of a gesture or the entire ritualisation process is 'indirect', since if viewed directly it seems to be a play of meaningless, pointless gestures or aimless actions, albeit often so aesthetic that dancing couples can learn something from them. In the play behaviour of young animals, too, one often discerns forms of ritualisation, more particularly of socialisation, which playfully initiate the young and familiarise them with the harsh world of hunting and killing in which they will have to survive. It is a kind of theatre, a game of searching for communication, for certain contacts or a safe way of evoking longings through play-acting and apparently aimless, superfluous gestures. It entails all kinds of postures, often accompanied by 'cries': noises, even artistic 'songs', in question and answer, challenge, playfulness, feigned rejection and canny acceptance. Thus ritual behaviour seems to be a ritualisation of certain everyday actions; it consists in periodic performances, arising from agreeable and disagreeable experiences in non-stylised daily life, which afterwards restore the performers to the complexities of everyday life, but enriched by 'experience' and 'clarification'.

Even though humans are 'more' than just members of the animal species, nonetheless, generically or by virtue of their biogenetic corporeality, they belong to the animal species that performs rituals. It implies, inter alia, that corporeality, the human body, plays a key role in human rituals as well. This is evident, almost paradoxically, in most religious rites, which, at an anthropological level, have to do with eating and drinking, sprinkling and anointing, reproduction or procreation, sickness and healing, love, awareness of failure and guilt and a need to make up for it, the stages of reaching adulthood and of aging and dying. Forms of ritualisation have to do with living and surviving. Rituals are about everyday things that are reduced to

their ultimate meaning: a matter of life and death, of living again, of birth and rebirth.

As both an animal and a human need, or even a human imperative – researchers of ritual have not yet reached agreement on whether the need for ritualisation is an intrinsic, universal category of our common humanity and hence *in fact* an anthropological constant, of which I am convinced – ritual is rooted in biogenetic, psychosomatic and ecological elements, the latter being both natural and cultural. Our bodies are not only full of biorhythms with a biological calendar, of which we are hardly conscious, but as human beings belonging to the ritualising animal species we are also 'programmed' and embedded in a society with a distinctive, unique culture, with an immediate worldly context and its own notions about people and reality, whether bound up with transcendental powers and forces or not. To us human rituals are a key to the way people see, structure and interpret their world. Within that framework there certainly is freedom of choice, but people are also pre-programmed for ritualisation. For we cannot stealthily bypass our bodies, and corporeality entails biological, biosocial and biophysical needs. Human life is only possible within rhythms and structures and in socio-cultural contexts. Rites are never purely decorative or some sort of etiquette, even though a ritual system may be given a decorative setting. Thus table manners as decorum form part of ritual: they ease the gathering, make it agreeable and ensure conviviality around the table. Not all moments of everyday life are a matter of 'to be or not to be', hence many forms of behaviour are not incorporated into rites. Indeed, ritual becomes more understandable when viewed against the backdrop of day-to-day behaviour that is not ritualised, or if ritual behaviour is compared with related actions, for instance in the theatre.[9] Ethno-anthropologists have noted that in some cultures there is no distinction between rites and drama (cf. the ancient *drômenon*) and many of them see a kinship between liturgy and theatre, notwithstanding profound differences and the fact that they represent different forms of speech and action. Thus, for instance, liturgical ritual is not theatre! Yet one must remember, also in the case of liturgical rites, that because of people's bio-sociological and bio-psychological corporeality their behaviour and attitudes always display a pre-conscious or latently conscious behavioural pattern. Hence ritual is rooted in a network of interrelationships between people, who, through their corporeality, are embedded in a natural and socio-cultural ecosystem. In rites these multifaceted forms of dependence surface. Unintended connections betray the existence of latent ritual gestures and forms of behaviour.

[9] See A.N. Terrin, 'Rito e teatro: Riflessioni a partire dall'antropologia culturale e dalla storia comparata delle religioni' in: *Studia Patavina* 38 (1991), 565-594.

In the context of what I have just said, especially the phenomenon that natural or biological rhythms acquire a cultural dimension in human ritual, certain features of the rituals of what are known as historical religions become more comprehensible. What Thomas Aquinas called 'nature sacraments', that is seasonal feasts, are often incorporated into new rites that commemorate and re-enact historical events, such as the exodus from Egypt and, in the New Testament, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus the Christian liturgical seasons reflect a merging of typical data from the Christian tradition with Jewish feasts, themselves a historical re-actualisation of agrarian nature festivals. Regardless of how such a custom is legitimised theologically and apologetically, the various layers of, for example, a particular Christian liturgical feast (think of Easter) can be traced to the even deeper dimension of ritual; a consequence of the real matrix of all ritual, namely the human body with its natural and cultural-historical ecosystem.

When it comes to religious rites, Ritual Studies shows that religions have an essential social and socialising dimension: religion is more than individual 'faith'. This compelled theorists (in this particular field) to look for common structures that lurk behind the manifest differences between religious beliefs. And in the process they learned that ritual systems have a logic of their own; hence one looks for their meaning rather than the way they function. Catherine Bell rightly criticises European and American scholars for their inclination to interpret rituals simply as performances of prescribed or canonical texts; they forget that within human beings, deeper than religion, there is a hidden, fundamental (bio-psychological) ritualising dimension, namely the insistence on *doing* something in such a way that the 'doing' itself gives the action a special, privileged status – that of ritual.[10] It follows that rituals cannot be reduced to texts, scripts and scores, scenarios, even detailed directions, no matter how important these may be. These aids are secondary to the actual ritual event, for they form part of a whole ritual *system*. The ritualist Roy Rappaport mentions this with reference to the distinction he makes between the 'canonical elements' (synapses or codes) of a ritual and its 'index elements', that is those that primarily provide information on immediate situations: shared psychological or physical states of participants in the ritual (in fact, connotations of the celebrating community here and now).[11] A liturgical text, for instance, is no more than a sediment. A ritual performance is not the present performance of ancient texts or prescribed gestures. To my knowledge Richard Schechner, Victor Turner's co-worker, was the first scholar to refer to rites not only as performance but also as 'transformance'.[12] With this term he

[10] Bell, *Ritual*, l.c. (n. 7), 166.
[11] See R. Rappaport, *Ecology, meaning and religion,* Richmond (Calif.), 1979, 179.
[12] R. Schechner, *Essays on performance theory, 1970-1976,* New York, 1977, 71.

wanted to emphasise that the performance of a music score by, say, Mozart is not identical with the available score and may not even correspond with Mozart's own intentions. In other words, the proposition that rituals are fundamentally static and immutably, even mandatorily traditional, has been empirically falsified. If one tries to keep a ritual system unchanging, it eventually puts pressure on the celebrating community, with the danger that it may disintegrate as a result. Ritual and creativity are in no way mutually exclusive. The cultural context, of which rites are a component, plays a decisive role in these rites – at any rate, if one does not want to incarcerate the participating believers in an archive, a historically accurate replica of ritual celebrations in bygone ages.

Ritual analyses also show that rites are mutable and offer scope for new rituals (or sacraments). This mutability has to do with the interrelationship between a ritual and its context, the ritual field. Rituals in fact appear to be a particularly appropriate means of striking a proper balance between people's appropriation of change and their sense of cultural continuity.[13] Thus ritual per se does not reinforce the status quo – as some ritualists think or even would like it to do – but can also express and articulate protest. The carnival ritual, for instance, is manifestly a temporary interruption of everyday life; it is an 'anti-structure' and as such playfully ridicules the everyday order, hierarchies and fashionable notions or happenings.[14] In Latin America eucharistic and prayer services are sometimes held which are explicitly socio-politically charged and thus display a similar 'anti-structure'.[15]

A common weakness of liturgists and theologians is often that they are not interested in what rituality is 'in general', whereas such structural knowledge could further their search for the distinctive meaning of their particular ritual traditions.[16] The fact that no decisive victor has emerged as yet in the battle for consensus on a conclusive theory of rituality does not detract from the reality that Ritual Studies has already produced sufficient scientific gains which Christian liturgical studies cannot ignore. Universal acceptance of the findings of these empirical theoretical analyses alone would obviate the danger of an exclusively intellectual approach. Ritual 'potential' is part of our humanity, and we share it with the animal world. But in human ritual that which, among

[13] In her latest book Bell gives an impressive analysis of the dialectics in ritual between tradition and change: *Ritual*, l.c. (n. 7), ch. 7, 'Ritual change', 210-252.

[14] See Turner, *The ritual process,* l.c. (n. 7).

[15] See the book by the Brazilian F. Taborda, *Sacramentos: praxis e festa,* Petropolis, 1987. It remains a classic, influenced not by the trends of Ritual Studies but by empirical scholars of playful celebration, which the author locates in a situation of 'resistance and surrender'. This sacramental theology was written from the angle of a resistance and liberation movement in the Latin American context.

[16] By particular traditions I mean the various rituals of Christians, Jews and Muslims and rites from Asia, Oceania, Africa, Australia and South America.

animals, primarily serves biological needs becomes the vehicle and expression of meaning and sense, and leads to emotional communication of profane or religious convictions, orienting and inspiring people's lives: a process, whether profane or religious, that has been 'reduced' or 'distilled into ritual'.

If Christian sacraments are included under the common denominator of ritual, the crux is that they enact and express the Christian faith in a performance based on a scenario or score. As ritual in a general sense this performance already has its own rules and logic; at the same time it is controlled and directed by a religious belief which, in and via the performance, deepens and intensifies into actual religious transfer. After all, faith does not live primarily by cognitive reflection on religious subject matter, even though such reflection is equally necessary and up to a point precedes faith; but only once it is practised in responsible brotherly and sisterly love does faith become the soul of Christian life. This faith is lived and actualised in profane everyday life and is also ritually celebrated and 'embodied' in sacramental praxis. These two forms of religious expression nourish Christian life. In symbolic actions faith acquires meaning and power; the celebration calls to mind what actually happens in the religiously inspired lives of people in everyday profane situations, the condition in which their lives are enacted.

2. Questions that are inadequately answered, and pointless questions that need no answers

This section is not so much about unsolved problems in the field of sacramental doctrine or liturgical studies as about all kinds of issues that have been debated traditionally (in some cases since the Middle Ages), often resulting in very elaborate or diplomatic, sometimes insincere answers. Some of these questions, moreover, turn out to be pointless.

It should be clear that it makes no sense for Christian liturgists and theologians to scrounge blithely from Ritual Studies or other scientific students of ritual. Empirical theoretical analyses of ritual in general, with their own logic, rules and codes, can obviously not pronounce judgment on Christians' sacramental self-understanding and certainly not on the religious substance which underlies the Christian sacraments with their religious mysticism and ethical awareness. Theologians who want to learn from scientific findings must necessarily apply searching hermeneutic criticism and must also be critically alert to actual theological notions assimilated into ethno-anthropological discussions of the specifically Christian sacramental heritage. After all, historically that heritage owes its existence to the message and praxis of Jesus, who is confessed as Christ, the Son of God, our Lord.

But reliable findings of scientific approaches to ritual (and Christian sacraments fall in this category) could also include criticism of certain

interpretations by Christians and even of Christian rituals. Thus it is true that Christian theologians have disqualified the rites of other religions, including Jewish or Old Testament rituals. While acknowledging them as meaningful symbols of grace (salvific for those who perform them as *opus operantis*), they deny their sacramental efficacy (which even Thomas still affirmed); indirectly this perception of non-Christian rituals or sacraments is already a form of discrimination. Whereas Christian sacraments have a distinctive Christian core and manner of performance, as religious rituals their structure and performative efficacy are no different from those of rituals informed by other religions. On the other hand my study of those who research ritual gives me the impression that they for their part often put Christian sacraments in categories that are wholly inapplicable to a properly interpreted Christian ritual. For the rest I would say that, by and large, this is little more than a matter of different terminologies. Some ritualists insist on calling all rituals that actively accomplish or 'do' something magic. In this context magic does not have a negative but, on the contrary, a positive connotation (this applies, e.g., to the work of Ronald Grimes). But in terms of the ancient controversies of Catholics and Protestants such use of terminology can be misleading and confusing.

1. *The institution of the sacraments, and how many are there?*

Research in the field of Ritual Studies has demonstrated that the Christian sacraments as human rituals cannot be inferred directly from religious faith. As noted already, the soil in which ritual as such (and that includes the Christian sacraments) is rooted is human corporeality. Rituality grows from a matrix with biogenetic, (natural and cultural) ecological and psychosomatic components. This implies that where religious faith exists, it will express itself spontaneously in ritual, so that searching for the actual 'founder' of these rituals (from a Christian point of view, sacraments) is not an issue of primary importance. The religious pioneers who founded a particular religious tradition, in which rituals have spontaneously developed over the ages, together with their message and way of life that are embraced by their followers, are the factor determining the origin of rites, even though they may never have thought of instituting any rituals whatever. That applies to the Christian tradition as well. Whether Jesus himself wanted to institute the sacraments, maybe some of them, or all of them (and how many are there?), or none of them, is a purely historical question that can only be answered historically, either affirmatively or negatively.

In this perspective the number of sacraments, too, is a moot point. The history of the 'sacred septet' (*sacrum septenarium*), that is of seven sacraments, no more and no less (as the Council of Trent declared), is not a dogma, despite

the *anathema sit* that concludes each canon. In the late 11th, early 12th century a dispute arose among theologians about whether there were four (Lanfranc), five (Abelard), ten (Bernard) or twelve sacraments (Damian), which continued until the 14th century. In the days of the church fathers and the early Middle Ages scores of *mysteria* or *sacramenta* were in use. The two terms were in fact extremely fluid. The debate on whether *mysterium* or *signum* was most characteristic of what was known as *sacramentum* hardly every abated in this period; but meanwhile the term '*sacramentum*' had become dominant, while the meaning of *mysterium* as a cultic act disappeared. At that stage the question of how a sacrament should be defined was still undecided. Until the controversy about the 'septet' the only distinction was between the major sacraments (*sacramenta maiora,* the initiation sacraments of baptism, confirmation and the eucharist, which the Reformation preserved) and all other rites (*sacramenta minora*).[17]

When it came to creating some order in this medley, the medieval theologians, after much controversy, settled for the *septenarium*. Seven was already a sacred number in both Jewish and Christian tradition, but the theological decision on only seven sacraments was clinched, I learned to my surprise, by the mystical, indeed awful reverence (repeatedly eulogised in lyric poetry) of the seven planets that arose in the 12th century. In the first three documents I discovered in which medieval theologians opted for seven sacraments, the decision, on their own admission, was prompted by their reverence for the seven planets. By the time the council met at Trent the 'septet' was an accomplished theological fact, which, however recent (at that time), was approved by the council. The *anathema sit* that was appended to this decree referred (according to the council's own interpretation) solely to the fact that the church leadership reserved the right to determine which and how many sacraments (in the technical sense of the word) it would recognise officially; anyone who did not accept that policy was canonically disowned.[18] The canon of Trent did not explicitly exclude the possibility that the church could introduce new sacraments, if serious pastoral needs in the religious community were to require it. At any rate, the canon was directed solely against the Reformation, in effect against the rejection of certain sacraments by the Reformers.

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[17] Y. Congar, 'The idea of "major" or "principal sacraments" ', in: *Conc*. 4 (1968) no. 1, 12-17. Also see L.M. Chauvet, 'Sacrements', in: *Catholicisme,* l.c. (nt. 143), 13 (1993), 333ff.

[18] For the meaning of the expression '*anathema sit*' at Trent (which certainly does not imply 'condemnation to hell', as some people think), see the analyses of P. Fransen, in the collected volume of his articles: *Hermeneutics of the Councils and other studies,* ed. H.E. Mertens/F. De Graeve, Louvain 1985, esp. 69-94, 95-125 and 198-213.

2. *No isolated* materia et forma*, but a broadening of the liturgical field, both materially and spiritually.*

The new Christian view of the sacraments faces a twofold task: firstly, to avoid a purely intellectualistic approach to the category of *signum*, that is, an exclusively cognitive analysis of the phenomenon of sign and symbolic activity; and secondly, to prevent a ritualistic approach which, in a roundabout way, would once again objectify the flexible ritual feast to the extent that it would again contain covert magical aspects, as is evident in some publications. We have to avoid both the Charybdis of a purely hieratic and, at the same time, 'objectifying' liturgy, and the Scylla of an exclusively 'subjectivistic' approach to sacramental liturgy, which might even lead to banalisation.

We should also get rid of the obsession with just one given formula or one particular gesture as the be-all and end-all of sacramental liturgy. Older people will still remember how many priests were reduced to trembling by anxious scruples when pronouncing the eucharistic 'institution formula'. What is relevant, however, is the overall liturgical field with all its dimensions, which in a sense constitutes a single ecosystem where each element refers to all the others, where light, space, silence and song are just as important as what is often regarded as an isolated peak element. Naturally, and quite rightly, there are dominant symbols, but they should be viewed in proportion, an interactive relationship in which no single component can be elevated to an all-determining position. Everything has its place in the broad ritual field of the performance. Anyone who does not preserve that complex whole and over-accentuates isolated elements (even the institution formula of the eucharist), thus separating them from the celebration as a whole, turns the ritual into magical ritualism simply by concentrating frenetically on a formula. This form of ritualism whipped up into psychological frenzy should be regarded as a residue of the physicalist, 'pseudo-Catholic' interpretation of the real presence in the eucharist and the death of anthropological ritual activity, which in its turn provides the basis and concrete form of sacramental grace. The so-called 'dual element' of anthropological dimension and level of grace is in fact just a single Christian religious event, in which the one is not infrastructure and the other superstructure!

In my view a crucial point in this inquiry is to realise that the real subject of any liturgical sacramental celebration is both the collective religious community and the individual members of the liturgical community. [19] In God's assembled congregation various liturgical roles, including that of the

[19] Y. Congar in particular fought for this as far back as the 1960s: 'L'Ecclesia ou communauté chrétienne, sujet intégral de l'action liturgique', in: *La Liturgie après Vatican II,* ed. J.P. Jossua/Y. Congar, Paris, 1967, 241-243.

officiant, are assigned – each with its own place and capacity, without mystification of any particular role.

3. Opus operatum *and* opus operantis

My main aim in this subsection is to find a new way of closing the traditional gap between the *opus operatum*, the objective side of the sacrament, and the *opus operantis*, its subjective side, even more fundamentally than I tried to do in 1952 in my book, *De sacramentele heilseconomie*. [20] The *opus operantis* is intrinsically part of the *opus operatum*, for the two aspects combined are the actual performance that mediates God's gratuitous condescension and are not tagged on to it afterwards. The *opus operantis is* the *opus operatum*, though I would not put it the other way round, as if the *opus operatum* were the work of whoever performs it. In the first place I want to avoid the casuistry of the distinction between a 'valid' and a 'fruitful' sacrament that can lead to disastrously over-generalised conclusions. Secondly, I want to uphold the insight that in the *opus operatum* (of which the *opus operantis* is an essential part) God's free, gratuitous gift is decisive: through devoutly experienced, human ritual performances – independently of human merit – it allows participants in the liturgy to share in the abundance of God's goodwill.

The traditional division between the objective and subjective sides of a sacrament actually derives from Augustine of Hippo, who made a sharp distinction between a valid (*validum*) and a fruitful (*fructuosum*) sacrament. That happened at a time when his reaction to the doctrinal aberrations of the Donatists (who maintained that the personal integrity of the officiant affected the quality of the sacrament) put him in a dilemma and he could find no solution other than this distinction. At the time, in view of its theological potential, it was an extremely opportune solution and served its purpose. Historically, however, it led to a gradual, almost magical attenuation of the sacraments, especially in the eucharistic liturgy. In the 10th and 11th centuries, for instance, farmers used to take a consecrated host with them from church to bury in their fields, expecting it to ensure a bounteous harvest. The theology current at that time, based on a crudely realistic physicalism, offered only vague, if far-fetched, legitimation for this practice; at any rate the local church leadership, often with minimal theological training, tacitly permitted it.

4. *Linking 'sign' with causation: a categorical error*

Some empirical anthropological studies of ritual rightly criticise the physicalist approach of traditional Catholic sacramental theology, at any rate as it was

[20] See *De sacramentele heilseconomie: Theologische bezinning op S. Thomas' sacramentenleer in het licht van de traditie en van de hedendaagse sacramentsproblematiek,* I, part II, section I, 561-619 (tr.: *L'économie sacramentelle du salut*, Fribourg/Switserland, 2004, 455ff.).

practiced since the Middle Ages. The fact that Thomas Aquinas in particular made his own contribution in this regard, however, is often overlooked. To be sure, one must concede that he, too, used categories derived from physics. One need merely recall his use of hylomorphic theory, with its distinction between *materia* and *forma*, as a framework to make Augustine's famous proposition, 'Accedit verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum' (by adding the word to the element – e.g. water or oil – a 'sacrament' comes about), intelligible in Aristotelian terms. In this hylomorphic philosophical framework a human ritual action, with or without the use of an object (laying on of hands, sprinkling with water), linked with a ritual formula (e.g. 'I baptise you in the name of...') becomes, through the objective operation of the rite (*ex opere operato*), the instrumental 'cause' of grace, in the same way that a physical cause has a physical effect. If one faults Thomas for this, one is forgetting the traditional premise of his entire sacramental theology, namely that sacraments belong in the category of signs (*sacramentum est in genere signi*), that is of symbolic reference and representation – though one must concede that, particularly in his eucharistic theology, Thomas did not consistently adhere to this premise because of his choice, all but unavoidable in his day, of the physicalist model of matter and form, especially in regard to the conjunction of cause and sign. At the very least locating sacraments in the category of signs implies that their salvific action has nothing to do with physics or physical change. Even what Thomas calls eucharistic transubstantiation – indeed philosophically non-Aristotelian, in the sense that 'substance' is divorced from its 'accidents' – he considers proper to the category of symbolic signs, hence not referring to any physical changes in the bread and the wine. It shows that, whereas he does use the hylomorphic model, he prefers to interpret the instrumental causation of the sacraments non-physically, that is, analogously. In the Middle Ages there was simply no alternative to such an identification of the operation of the sacraments with physical instrumental causation. To complicate matters further, in our late modern era the use of both these concepts – causation and sign – have become philosophically suspect, especially among analysts of language.

This critical suspicion and semiotic difficulty are compounded by the fact that theology – as was almost unavoidable in the Middle Ages, given the lack of phenomenological and semiotic insights – conjoined the two problematic concepts in a formulation, brilliant for its day: '*significando causant*'; that is to say, through the dynamism of their signification the sacraments 'causally' mediate God's readiness to extend grace and the resultant forgiving, healing and sanctifying blessedness. In a different philosophical framework, however, the performative signification of a religious ritual as a whole is sufficient; anthropologically the sacraments have no need whatever of a supplementary

instrumental cause transcending the efficacious ritual of the Christian faith. The meaningful ritual in its entirety, being the human expression and vehicle of (ecclesial and individual) religious inspiration of all participants, *is* the actual gift of grace.

In later times Thomist epigones, and subsequent modern theological textbooks even more so, have by no means interpreted the application of hylomorphism to the sacraments analogously. Some textbooks went so far as to look for some mysterious transformation of the atoms and molecules in the eucharistic bread and wine. In the process the distinctive character of metaphoric action and symbolic speech was totally disregarded. In short, the peculiar meaning, structure and 'aim' or intention of symbolic activity and ritual were overlooked, particularly the fact that one has to invoke symbolic language and metaphoric actions to articulate and actualise the reality of grace;[21] after all, we can never express that dynamic reality in terms of our meagre terminology or our conceptual, controlling and 'objectifying' knowledge. The ritual event as a significatory expression surpasses pure reason not downwards from above, but upwards from below: rituality has its own logical rationality, but that rationality cannot be located or pinned down with a measuring rod. Hence rather than speak of 'healthy irrationality', as has been proposed, one could call it trans-rationality.[22] The 'operation' coming from God and the 'operation' upwards from below (coming from the faithful believers) is one and the same *opus operatum*, for the ecclesial and personal faith of the Christian participant in the sacramental liturgy is still embedded in the 'ritual performance' itself.

[21] Some scholars hold the view that metaphors do not deal in truth, but to my mind metaphors are very much concerned with the relation between meaning, thought (in concepts and images) and reality. In religious (especially Christian or sacramental) ritual, too, the cognitive relationship remains a vital ingredient, which should not be papered over, under pressure from the new notion of performative efficacy, with 'anti-intellectualist' emotion. Concern about the 'cognitive relationship' of propositions, metaphoric or otherwise, has nothing to do with intellectualism; that would be the case only if it entailed suppressing all other relations or not giving them their due.

[22] This debate can also turn into a battle of words. What many scholars now call trans-rationality is worked out by Thomas as *intellectus*, the antithesis and implicit basis of conceptualizing and analytical ratio. In Thomas's thinking *intellectus* (hence intellectualism) means something very different from rationalism and even includes more than 'intentional knowing'. It also embraces all inner life, which in the medieval classification of human faculties was not included under *ratio*, even though Thomas was sufficiently familiar with the interrelationship or *circuminsessio* of human faculties. One would have to circumscribe the current usage of 'intellectualism' somewhat more accurately.

3. OUTLINE OF A NEW VIEW OF SACRAMENTAL LITURGY, THEOLOGY AND PASTORAL PRACTICE

Religion in everyday life, stylised and flexibly distilled into symbolic rites

The word 're-discovery' in the title of this chapter is not a random or opportunistic insertion. I derive the term from a theological-methodological approach which, thanks to the new findings of empirical ethnology and cultural anthropology (of roughly the past decade), has truly given me fresh theological insight. To me the wealth of empirical material and explanatory analyses unearthed by these anthropological sciences that study the phenomenon of rites in terms of the model of 'rituality' (which assumes that this phenomenon is recognisable in both profane and religious rituals) became a veritable theological treasure trove, despite some critical reservations and circumspection in handling the material. Hence it was indeed a theological discovery.

Inspired partly by the scientific insights of this new approach to human ritual activity, I strolled once more through my old theological garden, *De sacramentele heilseconomie* (1952) and *Christus, sacrament van de Godsontmoeting* (Christ, sacrament of the encounter with God) (1958, 1959), weeding and planting a little here and there to give it a look more appropriate to the 21st century. To conclude this chapter I want to lift the veil over this new pathway through my old garden – an image I owe to my colleague Hermann Häring[23] – just a little.

The eventual title of my new book on the sacraments will probably be *Sacramenten – Jezus' visioen en zijn weg van het rijk Gods* (Sacraments – Jesus' vision and his way of God's kingdom), with the succinct subtitle, *Zin- en contrastervaringen tot ritueel gelouterd* (Experiences of meaning and contrast experience refined into ritual). I added the second part of the subtitle (refined into ritual) in July 1999, following a new book that its author, Huub Oosterhuis, presented to me as a gift.[24] In it I found a stanza that I want to insert immediately after the title page of my book, partly in grateful acknowledgment of what he has meant for liturgical practice in my country and beyond its borders. Freely translated it reads:

> Be present here so what we do
> may be well done: sharing his words of grace
> as bread and wine until he comes,
> vision refined into ritual.

[23] 'Twice he passed through the garden of theology - certainly not a garden of Eden' (our translation): H. Häring, 'Met mensen op weg, voor mensen op weg: Over het theologisch denken van Edward Schillebeeckx', in: *Mensen maken de kerk* (Report on the symposium on the 75th birthday of Edward Schillebeeckx), Baarn, 1989, 27-46, quot. 40.

[24] H. Oosterhuis, *Levende die mij ziet* ('Living One who sees me'), Kampen/Tielt, 1999, 76.

This image, 'vision refined into ritual', appealed to me strongly. Refining implies undergoing' some sort of process of catharsis: one lets it happen, the way a substance is purified by fire. It implies surrender, although it requires training: letting God be, for sacraments are special moments of grace when we celebrate what tends to be hidden in profane daily life, a reality present fragmentarily, in flashes. Surrender is one of the key words expressing the mystical process of the human search both for the Ineffable Mystery, 'the Sacred', and for expressive ritualisation of religious surrender to the Divine Mystery. That word (*legomenon*) and the actual practice (*drômenon*) belong to the experiential tradition of the major world religions, often in rebellion against 'established', somnolent religiosity. Refinement or purification, likewise, essentially belongs in the mystical tradition.

1. How did Jesus arrive at his vision of God's kingdom, the source of his preaching and life work, and of his road towards that kingdom, proclaiming God's rule which, for individuals and nations, spells divine salvation: happiness, justice and righteousness, love and peace among people in their life world in God's creation?

Put in a nutshell: Jesus' personal vision took shape in the experiential tradition of Jewish religion, in which the coming of the kingdom of God, God's reign or rule, was a known concept, albeit somewhat obscured in Jesus' day. Such a dream or vision presupposes powerful negative experiences, described as negative because they are *contrast* experiences: they derive from a shocking experience of a contrast sensed between the way things are and how they can and should become different and better. This contrast generates the dream, the project, and also the commitment to it. That is the essence of negative experience on whatever scale: it can destroy people, but it can also lift them up, for as *contrast* experience it implicitly includes a positive, albeit sometimes vague, vision, which suddenly or gradually clarifies. It is not for nothing that in the Gospels Jesus' decision to have himself baptised by John is followed by a forty-day sojourn in the silent but also aggressively menacing desolation of the wilderness, to contemplate and even wrestle with his dream or his life task.

Jesus' own contrast experience was, on the one hand, his involvement in the human history of suffering, upheaval, wars and injustice he observed around him in his occupied country, and on the other hand his personal experience of God, whom he called 'Abba' or 'dear Father', an experience of a God who cares for his creation, also for his people, the whole of humankind, destined for 'goodness', not for evil. Jesus experienced this God as a beloved Parent (combining male and female concern) intent on humankind; a God he experienced as caring, opposed to all evil, and as a Presence who refuses to recognise the power of evil in the world and to let it have the last word. For

Jesus he is a *Deus humanissimus*: 'God's glory is the living human being' (as the patristic theologian Irenaeus later proclaimed).

The Abba experience, not isolated but located in the real-life context of its contrast with what he experienced in the world, sheds light on the man from Nazareth. Mystical experience of God, *in contrast to* what he observed and experienced in the world around him, became the source of his life's work, of his message and way of life, and of the revelation of who he actually was: a human being in whom 'the fulness of God was pleased to dwell' (Col. 1:19), and therefore the mediator of God's liberation and salvation. Before his death, maybe ever since the murder of John the Baptist, he found himself confronted with a new contrast experience. His disarming, loving attitude, in solidarity with God and people, provoked opposition in 'this world', posed a threat to what 'power' always means in the world; it made love in this world vulnerable. Jesus' dream was thwarted by his fellow men, who duly got rid of him. But his faithfulness to a silent but everlastingly present God and his love of human beings remained intact: uncomprehending yet trusting surrender to the living God.

Hence Christian believers should be alert to problems in the world around them and should respond in keeping with their faith, for that is how we draw closest to God's active presence. At such times, when the two forms of presence coincide, when we are both involved with people and revealing the face of the Lord in a worldly situation, something of God's kingdom is realised. Mystics call it the *pati divina*, receptiveness to experiences of God: *letting God be God and letting God happen to us*. Jesus did not proclaim a kingdom for a distant future hereafter. Nor did he proclaim a kingdom that is realised invisibly within us. In innumerable, decipherable, historical moments, in ordinary daily life among people in the here and now, we can discern sparks of the grace of God's kingdom which continually 'irrupts' into human history in and through our faithful commitment to the world's problems. We can share, experience and interpret those sparks of divine grace in our human behaviour. As people, as believers, we also 'ritualise' it at appointed times, celebrating what happens and praising God.

2. Hence the sacraments have two dimensions: one anthropological, the other – merging with it – a 'theologal' one, focused on God. In the *sacramenta fidei ecclesiae* the vision of God's active kingdom – our letting God's work be done in our daily living – is ritualised. There God's world and the human world are intended, as one reality. Our spatiotemporal human world is God's world. But to us God's cause is a human cause. What is close to people's hearts is also close to God: it is his concern. Thus, on the one hand, there is the so-called profane level of everyday life where people and the world converge, in which we perceive flashes and facets of the active God – what we call our day-to-day

Christian life with its worldly tasks. And on the other hand there are the sacraments and the liturgy as a whole, in which we ritualise what transpires, both everyday and not everyday, both joyous and tragic. Ordinary actions are 'interrupted', in the sense that, at given times, such everyday behavioural complexes are stylised and, up to a point, fixed in symbolic movements. The ritual material is intrinsic to our very humanity; Christian faith is its soul and dynamic inspiration

Scholarly studies of ritual have shown me that rituals are an existential, ludic interpretation of existentially relevant actions, whether religious or profane – postures, gestures, forms of behaviour, protocols, eating customs, marriage customs – expressed in a culturally specific manner and embedded in specific cultural, social and even political structures. To my mind these scholars – because of understandable irritation with presumptuous intellectualism – lose sight of the fact that in its own way the dynamics of a ritual performance also refers to knowledge. After all, the logic of metaphoric, symbolic actions is not the same logic that forms the premise of modern, scientistic manipulation of matter, and hence of relations of cause and effect.

As mentioned already, ritual has two components: the *legomenon* or words in many forms – messages, promises, admonition and exhortation, stories of the living Jesus, et cetera – and the *drômenon*, comprising gestures, music, chanting, silence, objects like bread, wine, incense, candles, light as well as spatial arrangement and the liturgical order or *taxis* which, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 14:40, should prevail in any authentic, proper liturgy. These two components jointly constitute ritual or, in a Christian sense, sacrament. Hence the latter is a single, indivisible, performative, dynamic and meaningful happening executed in word and actions, in silence and song, in light and incense – in short, in playful earnest. *To Christians this ritual totality itself is God's means of grace, actualised at a cognitive, emotional and aesthetic level, in and via the inherent performative power of liturgical celebration inspired by the Christian faith.* Just as the performance of, say, a musical score can, *via the performance,* evoke and genuinely bring to life something in the performers, so in sacramental liturgy the salvific action accomplishes efficaciously (*efficax*) what it intends! Only then the ambiguous and abstract classical axiom that a sacrament is an efficacious sign of grace (*signum efficax gratiae*) is truly justified. This interpretation is indeed far removed from so-called physical, instrumental causation, however analogously it is understood. Both anthropologically and religiously causation in this sense falls wholly outside the richly textured signification that is peculiar to (sacramental or other) ritual. This active signification with its performative efficacy is operative already at the anthropological level of a genuine liturgical performance.

Hence the gift of grace is not a vertical addendum to the liturgical celebration, in the sense of a sort of superstructure. Human symbolic celebration of the church's faith by a celebrating community and being supported by it are God's gift of grace, not something that is added to it. The Christian faith of all participants in ritual liturgy (as the local representation here and now of what, fundamentally, the universal church confesses worldwide) is nonetheless the essence of all this, and at the same time the conduit of God's act in Jesus Christ; he, after all, is the 'pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (Hebr. 12:2), the faith of God's church in the sense of the assembled religious community, the *ecclesia,* aptly expressed by the term 'congregation': God's congregation as gathered in the church for liturgical celebration.

A perception of the sacraments based on the ideas of semiotics, the linguistic sciences and ethno-cultural anthropology has far-reaching implications, particularly for pastoral theology. It also explains why, by and large, traditional sacramental practice no longer works, and why the Christian faith is increasingly questioned by Christian believers themselves – the result not so much of declining religious feeling or religious needs as of outdated religious images, because neither religion nor the sacraments are embedded in a socio-cultural environment that is authentically rooted in the here and now (even though critical detachment from, and even protest against, that real-life environment may sometimes be warranted). Sacramental phenomena cannot be reduced to physical events. Sacramental grace is not designed for physical consumption. Sacraments belong in the category of symbols or signs, but in the full compass of height and depth, length and breadth of the wealth of meaning – cognitive, emotional and aesthetic – that the cultural human sciences have deciphered in what is known as ritual or symbolic activity: a playful yet serious activity that approximates the concrete density of reality more accurately than dogmatic formulas and doctrinal pronouncements (which does not mean that the latter are not also needed as always provisional – being culturally and historically restricted – definitions of certain uninfringeable horizons, especially when the church's religious life is in crisis).

Only when the contributions of the various cultural anthropological sciences have been interpreted theologically does it become clear – unlike in the past – that sacraments are an existentially emotive encounter with God in Christ Jesus. Such an approach is primarily a way of deepening symbolic praxis as a special way to 'knowledge of God' that is more accurate than purely theoretical, thematic knowledge of God (even though the church cannot do without such knowledge either). Over the centuries the gospel message has, on the whole, been communicated to believers more emotionally, more sensitively and especially more vividly by sacramental liturgy and depictions in the liturgical space of churches and cathedrals than by theoretical doctrines.

The sacraments involve both the expression and the construction and growth of a fundamental identity of Christians and Christian communities or churches, and of the 'ecumenical', universal church.

In sacramental liturgy we celebrate the Christian dream of God's kingdom proleptically, in anticipation. That kingdom, the basis of the celebrations in the Christian community, is also actualised fragmentarily in an openness to eschatological liberation and salvation, which entails more than individual or socio-political liberation. In fact, ritual celebrations show how God's footmarks in Christians' profane engagement are the *presupposition* of their sacramental celebrations, and how these celebrations – the occasions when Christians are *nourished by God* in and via Jesus in the power of Christ's Spirit – in their turn give courage, orientation and inspiration for their earthly endeavours, to which the liturgy returns them. Thus the eschatological vision of God's kingdom transcends both actual Christian praxis in the world and Christian ritual or sacramental celebration. Yet the anticipatory or proleptic realisation of the eschatological kingdom through both profane endeavour and liturgical celebration falls under the proviso of God's surprising judgment, which in this respect, too, is always new to us.

The Christian sacraments effect an encounter with God in a special way. To Christians that truly makes Jesus Christ the 'sacrament of the encounter with God', thus endorsing Tertullian's dictum, '*caro salutis est cardo*': corporeality is the pivot of salvation. This applies particularly to sacramental ritual, as a protest against the evil, absurdity and sinfulness in our worldly lives, and at the same time a festive celebration of the encounter with God already realised in that 'profane' life, *especially* in encounters with fellow human beings. That, at bottom, is the meaning of Tertullian's dictum.

Postscript on the term 'performance'

1. Throughout this chapter I have used the term 'performance' without defining or explaining it. Nowadays the word is commonly used with reference to films, television, the theatre, shows and the like. According to the 1989 edition of the Concise Oxford Dictionary the word means 'execution (of command, etc.); carrying out, doing; notable feat; performing of play, piece of music, or public exhibition; achievement under test'. The main overall meaning does appear to be a public show, with the added connotation of a successful show, and play-acting. It also suggests achievement.

Since about 1965 a performance has indicated an artistic performance in many genres and forms. Initially there was no audience participation: the audience watched or listened. But the concept soon broadened. A performance was no longer or not entirely self-contained: as entertainment it had to be infectious. Performances evoke a certain emotional involvement, including

criticism.[25] Performers tend to fight shy of the traditional stage, or to extend it to the auditorium or the street, in order to involve the audience actively in the show. They want to offer a kind of alternative entertainment. Hence a performance entails more than just bodily expression and/or artistic verbal and musical proficiency, showmanship and accomplishment.[26] In many kinds of performance – a music recital, pop festival, ballet and the like – the term refers mainly to the dimension of artistic forms of communication. Over the years these have increasingly turned into artistic communication in which aesthetics merged with ethical criticism.[27] A few years ago this was evident in Dario Fo's 'Mystero Buffo', and recently in 'The Emperor's Dream' (about Charles V), performed in Nijmegen by the Flemish Royal Ballet Company. In the same way aesthetics may merge into, and be subordinated to, religiosity.

Most recently, however, 'performance' explicitly acquired the down-to-earth meaning simply of 'efficiency' (which was one of its original meanings), more particularly the capacity to excel of, for instance, industries, investors and entrepreneurs.[28]

In addition 'performance' and 'performativeness' are key terms in linguistics (and this usage, too, has a bearing on liturgical ritual). Especially since J.L. Austin the pragmatics of speech-act theory refers to 'the performative character' of certain speech acts.[29] This means that the intended action is performed in the actual act of speaking (e.g. 'I promise that...', 'I swear that...', 'I baptise you...', 'I forgive you...'): The *legomenon* itself accomplishes or effects something. Performative speech acts are part of what is known as illocutionary speech. In Noam Chomsky's generative grammar, performance as 'speech behaviour' contrasts with 'competence', being the human language faculty or system of linguistic rules. Hence speech behaviour or performance is equivalent to what structural linguists call *parole*, whereas competence corresponds with *langue*.

2. In this article (and in my forthcoming book) I use the term 'performance', with many of the aforementioned connotations, to indicate ritual or liturgical (religious ritual) performances. *Leiturgia* (liturgy) derives from the Greek words *leitos* (from *laos* or 'people', in this case the Christian faithful) and *ergein*, meaning 'to act, to perform, to do'. The primary meaning of the word is profane; a public office or service is called *leiturgia*: a service or function 'relating to the people'. In Christian liturgy it is not a matter of just one

[25] See J. Jaeger, *Stijlgids: stijlen, stromingen en begrippen in de kunst van 1860 tot heden,* De Bilt, 1985, 86.
[26] Cf. *Lexicon van literaire termen,* H. Van Gorp e.a., Groningen, 1991, 80-81 and 299-300.
[27] See Th. Baumeister, *De filosofie en de kunsten: van Plato tot Beuys,* Amsterdam, 1999, 479.
[28] M. Schweitzer, *Performance of institutional investors* (Thesis, University of Maastricht), Maastricht, 2000.
[29] For J.L. Austin, cf. especially his *How to do things with words?,* Cambridge, 1962; for speech-act theory: J.R. Searle, *Speech-acts: an essay in the philosophy of language,* ib. 1969.

performer (the officiant) but of the assembled religious community, which collectively constitutes the active subject of the entire performance (even though the roles are divided among various individual participants). As both *legomenon* and *drômenon* a liturgical celebration has performative dynamic signification: words and gestures, each with their own context, together determine what is said or done symbolically or metaphorically. As performances religious rituals, hence the sacraments as well, have something of an artistic, consistent *mise en scène*, which is both a summons to and an expression of action: adoration, thanksgiving, praise, God-centred brotherly and sisterly love, and contemporary *ethos* or ethical behaviour. Sacramental liturgy is not theatre, is not a concert, ballet or show; but as a performance it has a family likeness to all these that reveals reciprocal affinity.

The word 'performance', which the Ritual Studies school uses as a matter of course, is also appropriate to designate Christian sacraments, in contrast to an exclusively intellectualised approach to them. Nonetheless it calls for consciously circumspect usage – which is my explicit intention.

TABLE OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

The chapters were originally published as indicated below.

1. Experience and faith

   'Ervaring en Geloof': A text composed based on a Dutch original in Schillebeeckx' personal archive, and (partially) published in German as: 'Erfahrung und Glaube', in: F. Böckle et al. (eds). *Christlicher Glaube in moderner Gesellschaft*, 25 (Freiburg, Basel, Wien 1980), 73-116.

2. The search for the living God

   'Op zoek naar de levende God.' [Lecture on acceptance of the post of ordinary professor of dogmatic theology at the R.C. University of Nijmegen on Friday 9 May 1958], Utrecht, Nijmegen: Dekker van de Vegt, [1959]. Translated by Edward Fitzgerald and Peter Tomlinson as: 'The search for the living God', in: *God and man* [chapter 2], London, Sydney: Sheed & Ward, 1969; New York: Sheed & Ward, 1969, p. 18-40.

3. Theological interpretation of faith in 1983

   'Theologisch geloofsverstaan anno 1983': Farewell lecture delivered on Friday 11 February 1983 by Dr Edward Schillebeeckx O.P., professor of Systematic Theology and History of Theology, Nijmegen University.

4. Liberating theology

   First published as 'Bevrijdende theologie. Bezinning op de politieke theologie van J.B. Metz', in: E. Schillebeeckx (ed.), *Mystiek en politiek* (Baarn 1990), 51-70.

5. Discontinuities in Christian dogmas

   First published as 'Breuken in christelijke dogma's', in: E. Schillebeeckx et al. (eds), Breuklijnen: *Grenservaringen en zoektochten. 14 Essays voor Ted Schoof bij zijn afscheid van de theologische faculteit Nijmegen* (Baarn 1994), 15-49.

6. Theological quests

   First published in: *Theologisch testament. Notarieel nog niet verleden*, Baarn: Nelissen, 1994, Part 2.

7. Culture, religion and violence: theology as a component of culture

   First published as 'Cultuur, godsdienst en geweld: Theologie als onderdeel van een cultuur', in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 36 (1996), 387-404.

8. Towards a rediscovery of the Christian sacraments: Ritualising religious elements in daily life

   First published as 'Naar een herontdekking van de christelijke sacramenten', in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 40 (2000) 164-187. English translation by Marcelle Manley published as: 'Towards a rediscovery of the Christian sacraments: ritualizing religious elements in daily life', in: D.G. Lange & D.W. Vogel (eds.). *Ordo: Bath, Word, Prayer, Table,* Akron (Ohio, US), 2005, 6-34.